Riding waves: representing women’s relational autonomy in the short story cycle

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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.

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Helena Kadmos
Dedication

To Annette Johnson
1962–2014

The most relational person I have ever known.
Abstract

The short story cycle is a collection of independent yet interrelated stories. This thesis is interested in the potential of the short story cycle form to tell stories about women’s ordinary lives and, within such stories, to explore the importance to women of continuing relationships of interdependence and care. This discussion is grounded in feminist critical discourses of relational autonomy.

It rests on the claim that the short story cycle is a particularly productive form for writers interested in stories exploring the complexity of apparently mundane moments in women’s relational lives and imagining how particular relationships transform women over the longer course of their lives.

The thesis is the product of a practice- and theory-based approach to research. The first part comprises an original work of fiction, which tells five, interconnected stories about individual women from three generations of one family in Australia, spanning the period between the 1980s and the 2010s. The stories focus on moments that linger, where action is limited, and where change is often nuanced or even imperceptible. The work consciously draws on structural and thematic elements of the short story cycle form uncovered through research into short story cycle theory and existing cycles written about women.
The dissertation comprising the second part of the thesis reflects on the distinguishing features of the short story cycle, its diverse rendering in North America, and its critical treatment by key theorists, highlighting how this mode of storytelling helps make salient women’s relational lives. This thesis also aims to increase awareness of the form in Australian literary scholarship. Therefore, the dissertation offers a close reading of one contemporary Australian short story cycle, *Purple Threads*, by Jeanine Leane, in order to demonstrate the imaginative significance and effects produced in an Aboriginal inflection of the form.
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Part One

Fiction
Part Two

Dissertation
1

Introduction

Relatedness is not, as our tradition teaches, the antithesis of autonomy, but a literal precondition of autonomy, and interdependence a constant companion of autonomy. Jennifer Nedelsky, 1989, 12.

I don’t see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time.

This thesis is interested in the potential of the short story cycle to tell stories about women’s ordinary lives, and to explore, within such stories, the complexity of apparently mundane moments where insight occurs and personal growth follows. Short story cycle is one of many terms in circulation, and the one that I have settled on, to refer to collections of independent stories that are linked in some ways.¹ These connecting devices may include one or more of the following: common characters, focalisation, setting, repeated events, motifs or themes. This discussion rests on the claim that the short story cycle is a particularly productive form for writers interested in stories about women’s experiences of the everyday, and the ways that these experiences transform women—emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, socially—over the longer course of their lives. Central to the

¹ As this thesis will show, theorists have different opinions about the distinctiveness of the form and about whether sub-genres can be identified within it. Therefore, it should not be assumed that all the terms in circulation refer to the same overarching notion of the form. Nevertheless, the reader will find the following terms used in work cited throughout: linked stories, composite novel, novel-in-stories, short story sequence, short story composite.
experiences of women’s lives that I claim are represented so richly by this form is the importance to women of their continuing relationships of interdependence and care. It is therefore grounded in feminist critical discourses of relational autonomy, which claim that a subject’s capacity to find her ‘own law’ or shape her own life, can develop only in the context of relations with others that nurture that capacity (Nedelsky, 1989, 11).

This thesis does not support regressive views that women’s biological capacities as child-bearers define them solely as mothers and homemakers. In contemporary, western societies women live out myriad life experiences in paid and unpaid work, as spouses and partners and parents, as single or separated, as childless, as factory workers and shop-assistants and political and business leaders, entrepreneurs and artists. However, this discussion asserts that many women in the west at different stages of their lives, whether or not they engage in paid work outside the home, will probably spend large amounts of their time in the private, domestic sphere as home makers or caregivers involved in the emotional and physical care of others, and that these experiences should not be overlooked. Feminist scholar Andrea O’Reilly claims that ‘it is in this everyday space that much of [a woman’s] learning takes place and quietly turns into wisdom and self-understanding’ (Abbey and O’Reilly, 1998, 21). In this dissertation I argue that since the advent of second-wave feminism many writers, such as Alice Munro (1977), Gloria Naylor (1983), Louise Erdrich (1985) and Elizabeth Strout (2008), have turned to the short story cycle to explore some of the more mundane experiences of women’s lives and that very often these
narratives resonate with ideas proposed by feminist discourses, typically associated with third-wave feminism, around intersectionality and relational autonomy. These short story cycles abound with representations of women whose lives are affected by a matrix of multiple subjectivities, including race, class and sexuality, and whose identities are shaped by webs of interdependent relationships. The individual stories explore the daily experiences of single women, mothers and wives, elderly, lesbian or bisexual women, Indigenous and migrant women.

The popularity of this form for writers interested in these experiences may be because readers’ conventional expectations of the novel—for dramatic momentum, for instance—privilege stories that are climactic, and that may thus overlook the drama of the everyday. The short story cycle by comparison, as a compilation of independent yet interrelated stories, usually focuses on smaller narrative arcs, and in doing so may offer unique possibilities for articulating many women’s experiences of their daily lives. This is not to say, of course, that women’s ordinary lives have been entirely ignored by writers of the novel. During the course of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Drabble, and Helen Garner, for instance, have

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2 The “wave” model is one used to describe periods of increased interest in feminist theory and political action in the west, most prominently in the United States. Not all feminists agree on the temporal, generational or theoretical borders between one wave and the next; however, it is generally recognised that the third wave, following the intense political activity of feminists in the 1960s and 70s, is characterised by a critique of second-wave feminism for its lack of recognition of differences between women. Third-wave feminisms are interested in how individual identities are constructed, and emphasise differences on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion and nationality, and polyvocality, or the importance of making room for a diverse range of voices and experiences (see, for example, Sanders, 2004). As R. Claire Snyder puts it: ‘third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition’ (2008, np).
created characters who struggle with the conflicting demands of motherhood and domesticity, and other personal needs for emotional or intellectual fulfilment. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that the unique structure of the short story cycle is particularly suitable for exploring this terrain. And yet the short story cycle is not widely recognised or understood as a unique form in its own right. Therefore, a brief introduction, ahead of a more detailed literature review in Chapter Two, is provided here to orient readers to the distinctiveness of the form.

**The short story cycle**

This thesis will show that, while a popular form amongst writers, understanding of the uniqueness of the short story cycle, and its recognition as a distinct literary genre, is not universal, and that even amongst short story cycle theorists there are different ideas about the characteristics and range of texts that should be included in attempts to define it. To support the arguments raised in this thesis therefore, I draw on Susan Garland Mann’s simple assertion that a cycle is defined by the simultaneous independence and interdependence of the stories that comprise it (1989, 15). Thus, while each individual story in a cycle can be read independently of the others, the placing of each story within the collected whole enables the cycle to achieve a deeper and richer meaning than the singular story can achieve. In other words, the stories achieve their potential when read in the context of the stories with which they are connected, just as our individual identities become meaningful in terms of the relationships with which they are

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involved. The themes of the cycle are more fully realised, and the reading experience more satisfying, when the stories are read as a cycle.

Although the short story cycle boasts a literary heritage that has roots in antiquity and has evolved from narrative traditions in many parts of the world, critical study of the form has been sporadic, occupying what Kathryn Matheny calls a ‘shadowy position in contemporary criticism’ (2012, 1). Many short story cycles are marketed and read as novels, or as collections of short stories, or praised as works with a new and unique structure. For instance on the back cover of Alice Munro’s *The beggar maid* (originally published in 1977), reviewer John Gardner is quoted as saying: ‘Whether … [this book] is a collection of stories or a new kind of novel I’m not quite sure, but whatever it is, it’s wonderful’ (Munro, 1991). One of the reasons for the paucity of critical attention could be the strong position the realist novel enjoys as the most conventional and popular form of narrative fiction, and the resulting emphasis on extended narratives that privilege stories about the linear trajectory of an individual character. Combining the ideas of several critics (including Wallace Gray and Ian Watt), literary scholar Sandra Zagarell argues that readers and critics have come to ‘equate novels with stories about individuals … [and] also to expect that such stories will always be about growth or decline and to identify all serious literary narrative with the novel’ (2007, 455). I argue that such expectations do not readily accommodate the mundane aspects of women’s ordinary lives. Yet

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4 Limited representations of women in fiction were of key interest to many critics writing at the height of second-wave feminism. For instance, of the master plots that dominate western literary traditions, Joanna Russ claims that ‘they are tales for heroes, not heroines’
when writers do turn to alternative narrative forms, readers, as we have seen with Munro’s reviewer, are sometimes unsure about what to make of the result. This is not entirely surprising, as there are overlaps between the short story cycle and other examples of what might be called experimental novels. It can be argued that, in general, attempts to create strict classifications around genres can be difficult to achieve. Zagarell suggests that genres ‘stand behind individual works of literature but do not govern them’, or that ‘works participate in genres rather than belong to them’ (2007, 453). And Matheny remarks that ‘encompassing numerous formal strategies and narrative approaches, [the short story cycle] does not lend itself to easy explanation, not even in a critical environment that all but dogmatizes multiplicity and ambiguity’ (2012, 2). Nevertheless, one outcome of the short story cycle’s lack of mainstream recognition is that readers may be unprepared to fully appreciate how the form functions. As Zagarell claims: ‘fictions about modes of life that are collective, continuous, and undramatic … are puzzling … readers either assume the work has no story, often delegating it to the supposedly inferior category of the sketch, or impose familiar but inappropriate notions of linear plotting on it’ (2007, 455–6). Matheny draws a similar conclusion: ‘misunderstanding of the short story composite forces us to read these works within a context and a set of reader expectations they have not sought to conform to or adopt’ (2012, 8).

(1972, 4). She also argues ‘that of all the possible actions people can do in fiction, very few can be done by women’ (1972, 5). And she laments the dearth of active roles for women in fiction: ‘what myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist? Very few’ (1972, 7).
Readers, therefore, are generally familiar with the way the conventional realist novel works. They know, for instance, that, generally speaking, chapters should be read in the order they are presented so that the overall story makes sense. They expect that a central character or small range of characters will feature throughout the novel, and that a drama involving those characters will unfold, reach a narrative climax, and be resolved by the end of the book. They certainly expect all the questions the novel has raised to be answered by the last page. The short story cycle works differently. It is usually possible to read the stories in any order, and still to have a sense of the themes, ideas and significance produced by the cycle as a whole. Narrative threads are often left unresolved between stories; questions may remain unanswered; various characters may take the stage and some will disappear for good, or reappear in a different story. The overall drama of the cycle may be more muted, the action typically occurring on a smaller plane than in most conventional novels. These features ensure that meaning is to be gained through the reader’s attention to different cues, such as the connections to be made between what is said and left unsaid. Through familiarity with the form and how it functions in unique ways, readers of short story cycles, Margot Kelley claims, therefore come to an understanding ‘that identity is constituted through relations with other subjects, and is continually negotiated and renegotiated, making identity itself a somewhat evanescent phenomenon’ (1995, 306).

This thesis will show that these features of the form suitably accommodate storytelling about women’s experiences of their ordinary lives, the
importance of the relationships that sometimes encumber them but that they commit to sustain and nurture, and the personal transformations that nonetheless emerge through these experiences. This is because both the structure and the capacity of the form to explore various dimensions of, or perspectives on, a given theme resonate with the nature of relational identity itself, which is understood not in terms of linear development, but through a complex of sometimes discontinuous, fragmented encounters with others and by means of temporally diverse threads. The following section explores the concept of relational identity and its suitability to theorise the way that women’s lives are so often represented in short story cycles.

Relational autonomy

Feminism’s reconceptualising of the philosophical concept of autonomy brings to the fore the kinds of experiences that are central to this discussion of representations of women’s lives in the short story cycle. Philosopher John Christman explains that:

To be autonomous is to be one's own person, to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self (2011).

For many feminists, the core idea of autonomous choice has value as a means of understanding gender oppression, but how it has been conventionally perceived is regarded with suspicion, seeming to promote a notion of the individual as self-sufficient and atomistic, abstracted from the

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5 Individual autonomy is central to Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, and is a fundamental principle of John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian liberalism (Christman, 2011).
social relations in which actual agents are embedded. For instance Jennifer Nedelsky remarks:

Feminists are centrally concerned with freeing women to shape our own lives, to define who we (each) are, rather than accepting the definition given to us by others (men and male dominated society, in particular). Feminists therefore need a language of freedom with which to express the value underlying this concern. But that language must also be true to the equally important feminist precept that any good theorizing will start with people in their social context. And the notion of social context must take seriously its constitutive quality; social context cannot simply mean that individuals will, of course, encounter one another. It means, rather, that there are no human beings in the absence of relations with others. We take our being in part from those relations (1989, 8–9).

Philosopher Natalie Stoljar further claims that the atomistic conception of autonomy seems hostile to many women’s experiences arising from relationships of interdependence, caring and responsibility, and remarks that if autonomy is somehow conceived as inimical to being a woman—because, for example, being a woman involves valuing social relationships of care whereas being autonomous devalues such relationships—one denies women, in particular, the social and political advantages associated with the label “autonomous” (2014 np).

Feminist theorists have thus sought to reconceptualise the notion of autonomy, to rescue its emancipatory potential from the restrictively gendered ideal of the “self-made man”. While different theorists recast autonomy in different ways, in general, relational autonomy is seen as an umbrella term for a range of perspectives based on a shared belief that agents are socially situated in identities formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex intersection of social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000, 4).
Philosopher Marilyn Friedman puts the case for relational autonomy in the following way:

Autonomy is no longer thought to require someone to be a social atom, that is, radically socially unencumbered, defined merely by the capacity to choose, or to be able to exercise reason prior to any of her contingent ends or social engagements. It is now well recognized that our reflective capacities and our very identities are always partly constituted by communal traditions and norms that we cannot put entirely into question without at the same time voiding our very capacities to reflect (2000, 41).

Similarly, this thesis supports the view that women come to a greater sense of who they are within the context of their relationships. As Nira Yuval-Davis puts it, ‘identities are individual and collective narratives that answer the question “who am /are I/ we?”’ (2006, 197; italics added).

To represent these notions of relational identity in literature, then, requires less emphasis on the individual trajectory of an autonomous person, and a greater focus on the web of relationships and shared experiences that shape identities and foster personal growth and collective fulfilment. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that the narrative form of the short story cycle structurally and thematically represents, and in doing so privileges, these ideas about women’s identity and capacity for agency, and therefore effectively articulates some experiences that are central to many women’s lives. Of course relationality and relational autonomy are not conditions exclusive to women. Scholar Paul John Eakin cautions that readings of ‘relational identity through the lens of gender, with the relational coded as feminine and the autonomous as masculine’ risk that such readings will perpetuate the patriarchal binaries they seek to resist (1999, 51).
Nonetheless, in terms of the cycles which I both reflect on and write, as a reader and creative writer, it is women’s relational experiences that are most commonly reflected in this form, evidenced by the high number of women writers using it. For instance, writing about novels-in-stories, which she recognises as a sub-genre of the short story cycle, Kelley claims that during the 1980s, ‘about 75 percent of the current writers are women, often women who live in positions of double marginality as members of visible minorities or as lesbians’ (1995, 296). This thesis therefore explores the function of the short story cycle within this prescribed space of mostly women writers, writing mostly about women’s lives.

**Map of critical discussion**

No one account can encapsulate the diversity of women’s experiences. The overriding emphasis of this thesis, however, is on ways in which the short story cycle articulates the relational drama integrated into the mundane and everyday. The fiction comprising the first part of the thesis seeks to mobilise this theory by telling some stories, connected in several ways, about individual women from different generations of one family. The stories articulate some experiences of white, middle-class, suburban women and linger in specific times and places, where action is limited and where the changes in the characters’ relational lives are often nuanced or imperceptible. In this second part of the thesis, the dissertation demonstrates some of the greater diversity represented through the short story cycle in the west following the height of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. It aims to assess claims about the short story cycle and stories about women by
making explicit the features of the form, and showing how these features make storytelling about women’s relational lives possible. These ideas will be argued through a careful study of the features of the short story cycle and examples of these features working in several texts. The study will culminate in a close reading of one contemporary Australian short story cycle that explores rural Australian Aboriginal family life in the 1960s, thus demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of the form.

The research is underpinned by the following primary question: what possibilities does the short story cycle offer writers interested in telling stories about women? Thus, while some understanding of the short story cycle is useful for helping readers and critics recognise it as a distinct form, this thesis does not strive to raise awareness of the form for its own sake, but for its capacity to reflect on the interests of women through varied representations of their relational lives. Therefore, Chapter Two provides a selective overview of short story cycle theory and criticism in order to identify key themes motivating the study of this form to date, and to strengthen links between research undertaken in the United States and Australia.

Chapter Three examines more closely the ways in which the short story cycle offers opportunities to represent in fiction how women find meaning and experience a sense of relational autonomy in the daily moments of their ordinary lives. It draws on the feminist notion of “the wave” as a metaphor to describe the cycle’s ability to represent personal transformation as
relational processes of return and revisioning. This chapter explores how the cycle can represent alternative experiences of time that may be more suitable for articulating women’s experiences as social subjects involved in caring relationships with others, particularly where that work is centred in the home. Other key features of the cycle are explored, including the mosaic narrative structure of the cycle, its focus on minor narrative arcs, its suitability to accommodate narrative silences, and the longer story within the cycle. These features are illustrated with specific examples drawn from existing short story cycles about women, chosen for their diversity and capacity to provide a snapshot of the development of this field for the articulation of women’s experiences.

Having established the features of the short story cycle pertinent to this study of women’s relational lives, Chapters Four and Five draw on these features through a detailed study of Purple threads by Wiradjuri writer and scholar Jeanine Leane (2011). As a cycle of stories about three generations of Aboriginal women and girls, Purple threads show these women responding to often oppressive social and historical conditions by drawing strength from their relationships to their country and traditional culture, to each other, other family members and neighbours. Like the interdependent stories that comprise the cycle, these women are enriched and obtain greater

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Purple threads won the David Unaipon Award in 2010 for a manuscript by an unpublished Indigenous writer and has since been shortlisted for both the 2012 Commonwealth Book Prize and the 2012 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing. The Wiradjuri people have inhabited modern-day New South Wales, Australia for at least 40,000 years. Their country extends from the Great Dividing Range in the east, and is bordered by the Macquarie, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers. Consequently, the Wiradjuri are also known as the people of the three rivers (Wiradjuri Condobolin Corporation, 2014).
fulfilment even while sometimes encumbered by the people they feel responsible for and indebted to through relationships of care and protection. The text, therefore, reinforces the idea of relational autonomy as Friedman describes it, that the values and responsibilities of interdependence should be seen as a cultural ideal because they ‘make relationships and communities worthwhile’ providing, for instance, ‘vital sources of care for the most vulnerable members of our society’ (2000, 47). Chapter Four contextualises *Purple threads* within other discourses around Indigenous literature, including the rich heritage of Aboriginal women’s life-writing, and explores how this cycle reflects relatively new developments in this field from auto/biographical to more overtly fictive forms. This chapter also explores the notion of *Purple threads* as a community narrative, which represents the experiences of a community more broadly. Chapter Five examines closely how the features of the short story cycle work in *Purple threads* to articulate these women’s ordinary experiences, spiritually, emotionally, socially and intellectually, by drawing on specific examples from the text that depict these women as relational subjects.

The Conclusion draws on one short story cycle, which sits within an otherwise unconnected collection of stories, to pull together the claims made in this thesis about the form’s suitability to represent women’s relational lives. As another more recent cycle, ‘William and Clare’ by Amy Bloom also highlights some of the developments in the creative field since the publication of the earlier cycles used in this thesis, which emerged during and shortly after the height of second-wave feminism in the west. From this
perspective, the Conclusion also outlines some questions to motivate further research in the field.

A note on “knowing”—acknowledging my speaking position

As this thesis emerges out of the disciplines of English and creative writing, the writing of short story cycles about women is as central to this investigation as the reading of them. This is evidenced by the fiction component of the thesis, but also by the core interest motivating this dissertation. As a writer, I am interested in what other writers have achieved using the short story cycle. During the course of this research project I conducted two interviews with Leane to explore her intentions when writing *Purple threads*, and her experiences of using the short story cycle form. Leane’s own thoughts are woven through the chapters on her book, illuminating various aspects of this research with reflections on her own critical and creative practice. Details of the procedures and methods used to conduct, analyse and incorporate material from the interviews can be found in the Appendix.

As a Euro-Australian researcher, I am aware that my engagement with a text by an Indigenous author is inextricably linked to a historically problematic relationship between researchers and the researched. As non-Indigenous scholar Linda Westphalen acknowledges, ‘historically, research into First Nations discourses, knowledges, experiences and histories has tended to have been at the expense of, rather than of benefit to, First Nations peoples’ (2012, 60). Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson claims that this is
because the dominant regime of academic knowledge is shaped by whiteness, and is therefore ‘culturally and racially biased, socially situated and partial’ (2004, 88), as ‘whiteness opens up and forecloses certain ways of reading the Indigenous Other because racial codes are always present in whatever we do and think’ (2006, 255). The importance of these claims cannot be denied, although, as non-Indigenous scholar Anne Brewster remarks, the significance of whiteness ‘as a category against which (racial) difference is measured’ is often invisible to white people (2005, np).\(^7\) I acknowledge that my whiteness shapes my reading and research, even without being able to fully comprehend the full implications of this. As whiteness is only one factor of my identity that loops itself in and around many others, such as my sex, gender, class and sexual orientation, the actual impact of my whiteness on my research is difficult to determine. Indigenous scholar and activist, Marcia Langton, illustrates the likewise unreasonableness of assuming the impact of Indigeneity on one’s speaking position. While arguing for self-representations by Aboriginal people in all forms of cultural expression, she cautions that, it is a ‘naive belief that Aboriginal people will make “better” representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives “greater” understanding’ (1993, 27). She describes this as another form of universalising Aboriginal people, ‘without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference, and so on’ (1993, 27).

I accept that, as an individual situated in a specific social, historical context, my reading is partial, situated and contingent. I wish to avoid, however,

\(^7\) Brewster’s comment forms part of an analysis of the poem ‘Feelings’ by Lisa Bellear, which describes an encounter between an Indigenous woman and a white female academic.
what feminist researcher Denise deCaires Narain describes as an anxiety on the part of western feminist scholarship to engage with the texts of postcolonial/Third World women for fear of “‘getting it wrong’”, resulting, she claims, in a situation where, ‘the “familiar” cultures of the West remain the most frequent focus of feminist enquiry’ (2004, 242). Much of the focus of short story cycle scholarship is the literature of white, middle class, North America. This thesis seeks to disrupt that trend by widening the scope to include the Australian context, where the form is being picked up by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers. I listen, therefore, to the experiences of researchers before me. These include David Hollinsworth, for instance, who suggests that we ‘create alliances and negotiate collaborations across our partial identifications’ (1995, 97). Brewster proposes that for whiteness to move beyond a ‘trope of domination’ (2005, np) it must ‘be constantly attentive to the persistent and ongoing reconfiguration of white power’ (2005, np). And Westphalen claims that analysing one’s speaking position is an ongoing process that ‘begins with the researcher listening and reflecting on their position as a member of an audience, and continues indefinitely’ (2012, 64), and who also recommends continuing alliances between academics and authors (2012, 71). I acknowledge and appreciate, therefore, the interest that Jeanine Leane, as scholar and author of *Purple threads*, has taken in my research, and am grateful for the conversations we have had that have helped enrich my understanding of her book in particular and the short story cycle in general.
Swift

2

Contextualising this study in relation to short story cycle theory

Critical appraisal of the short story cycle has developed sporadically, is primarily focused on Anglo-American literature and traditionally concerned with determining the form’s distinctiveness in comparison to other developments in contemporary narrative literature. More recent scholarship, however, broadens the scope to examine how the form is being used to articulate the experiences of people from other ethnic backgrounds, and how the form is specifically shaped by gender. This chapter aims to situate this Australian creative/critical investigation into the short story cycle and the articulation of women’s everyday relational lives in fiction, within the critical field of the form.

Critics have debated and continue to debate the most appropriate term to describe the short story cycle. It is worth noting that in a lecture on the short story cycle, author and teacher of creative writing, KL Cook, remarks that confusion surrounding the name reflects the form’s vitality and energy (Cook, 2007). This thesis does not seek to engage with that discussion; however, as this dissertation continues, my preference for short story cycle, the earliest of the terms formally assigned to the form, and the reasons for this, become clear. Nevertheless, to represent faithfully the extent to which naming is a central theme in this field, where possible I use the term that
each author uses as I engage with their work. The following literature review covers three main areas of research: established key texts, contemporary scholarship, and the creative and critical field in Australia.

**Key texts**

Forrest L Ingram’s *Representative short story cycles of the twentieth century: studies in a literary genre* (1971) is widely regarded as the first systematic attempt to define the form. Ingram produces what he describes as ‘an inclusive rather than an exclusive definition’ of the short story cycle (1971, 15). He skips earlier versions of the form to focus on the twentieth century where he believes the central dynamic of the cycle—‘the devices by which the “many” become components of the pattern of the “one”’—is more subtle, leading him to settle on a cycle as ‘*a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts*’ (1971,19; italics in original).

Ingram also distinguishes between cycles originally designed as such by the author, those made up of previously written or published stories that were later collected or arranged into a series by an editor or editor-author, and those that were completed, through the addition of subsequent stories to existing ones, to form a complete cycle. Ingram’s claims have received some criticism on the basis that they over-emphasise authorial intention and the response of readers (Kennedy, 1995, ix; Nagel, 2001, 11); nevertheless, his work is foundational and is often cited in subsequent research in this field, including by most of the critics mentioned below.
Susan Garland Mann’s *The short story cycle: a genre companion and reference guide* (1989), takes a more historical approach than Ingram’s study, claiming that ‘as long as stories have been told, there have been storytellers who combined tales to create larger effects’ (1989, 1). Mann provides an overview of the form’s development from ancient oral traditions originally composed as sung stories passed from one generation to the next, giving *The Odyssey* (circa 800 BCE) and *The Iliad* (760–710 BCE) as examples, through to developments in the twentieth century. Mann categorises short story cycles from that century into sub-genres, including collections of stories about the maturation of a central character in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, and the artist in the *künstlerroman*, and cycles unified by theme, such as *Dubliners*, by James Joyce (1914), which explores the sense of alienation and isolation many early twentieth-century characters are represented as experiencing in modernist fiction (1989, 1–11). Mann concludes her overview by asserting that the ‘one essential characteristic of the short story cycle [is that] the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated’ (1989, 15). This creates a necessary tension, she claims, in the way the cycle is read, because the reader has the choice of either reading an individual story independently of the rest, thereby ignoring its context in the overall book, or intentionally to see what it contributes to the rest of the work (1989, 18). Her comments on this necessary tension are

8 *Bildungsroman* is a German term that refers to a novel that follows the development of the central protagonist from childhood or adolescence to adulthood (Baldick, 2008, 35). *Künstlerroman* is a term that refers to a novel whose central character is an artist of any kind (Baldick, 2008, 180).
worth quoting in full because they form a succinct description of the formal structure and narrative impact of the short story cycle:

While difficult to describe, this tension … is one of the chief pleasures that readers of cycles experience. They enjoy experiencing the world of the short story and the novel simultaneously. Despite their familiarity with the books, readers continue to appreciate the fact that Ike McCaslin exists beyond the boundaries of ‘The Bear,’ that Virgie returns revitalized in the final story in The Golden Apples, and that Joyce allows imagery to develop, often ironically, through the apparently separate lives of characters as diverse as Eveline, Lenehen, and Gabriel Conroy. I do not think the case is overstated if I say that readers enjoy reveling in the necessarily restricted form of a single story and then discovering that they can, as they continue to read, transcend these boundaries (1989, 19).

I concur, from my own reading, that this tension is a pleasure offered to readers of the short story cycle not available in the same way to other narrative forms, and that the mode of reader participation in the process of meaning-making is particularly satisfying. For example, the connections between characters and stories in Jennifer Egan’s A visit from the goon squad (2010) are at times so difficult to trace that the discovery of those connections is immensely rewarding to readers, evidenced by the fan base surrounding the text and Internet sites dedicated to mapping these myriad network of characters, events and themes (for example, see Gillian 2012; Dobbert 2014; Petty, year unspecified).

Authors of The composite novel (1995), Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris wade into the debate about the name of the form, suggesting that composite novel more aptly describes the nature of the short story cycle. They claim

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9 Mann is referring to three short story cycles here. ‘The Bear’ (one of the seven interrelated stories) in William Faulkner’s Go down, Moses (1942/1996), Eudora Welty’s The golden apples (1947), and James Joyce’s Dubliners (1914/1967).
that the term cycle implies cyclical motion and return to the beginning,
thereby precluding the possibility of the kind of linear development that is
found in a novel and which they believe is also to be found in some
composite novels (1995, 5). Typically, the term composite novel was used
to refer to books written by multiple authors, but Dunn and Morris apply it
to a single text by one author that comprises several of what they call ‘text
pieces’ (1995, 7), thereby casting a wider net than Mann to include in the
category books (such as Gertrude Stein’s *Tender buttons* (1914/2000)),
containing text pieces that cannot be called short stories—fragments, single
sentences, photographs, lyrics and drawings. These individual text pieces, if
given a title of their own, they argue, are designed to be autonomous and are
therefore complete (1995, 8–9).

The degree of narrative linearity is not a primary concern for me when I
think about what makes this form so effective in articulating women’s
ordinary lives. In the next chapter I explore in more depth the relational
aspects of individual identities and their stories that are conjured for me by
the term cycle, strengthening my own preference for the phrase, short story
cycle. However, like Dunn and Morris, J Gerald Kennedy, editor of a
collection of essays entitled *Modern American short story sequences:*
*composite fictions and fictive communities* (1995), is also preoccupied with
narrative linearity, championing his preferred term “sequence” because it
emphasises the progressive unfolding and cumulative effects of the
individual stories comprising the form (1995, vii). He sees some short story
cycles, such as Amy Tan’s *The joy luck club* (1989)—a collection
configured from previously published short stories—as examples of the experimental novel which ‘has for about seventy-five years been veering toward the story sequence as a decentered mode of narrative representation’ (1995, x). Kennedy is therefore less inclined than Mann, for instance, to draw sharp distinctions between the story sequence and the novel, seeing far greater similarities between the formation and function of both forms. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the story sequence proliferated in the twentieth century, and considers the interests of contemporary writers and readers that may be aptly addressed by the form:

A remarkable new generation of American fiction writers now seems poised to carry the sequence into the next millennium, adapting it to the jarring incongruities of postmodernism and the developing implications of chaos theory. The urgent need to make sense of contemporary culture and its violent preoccupations compels us to attend more closely as readers and critics to the fragmented images of twentieth-century life glimpsed in momentary clarity in the short story sequence (1995, xiv). 10

The survey thus far shows that the discussion of the short story cycle form mainly emanates from the United States and is heavily focused on texts by American authors. Rolf Lundén even argues that the form is ‘specifically American’ (1995, 294), ‘a literary version of [the] conjunction of unifying and discontinuous energies … characterized as yet another expression of the coexistence of unity and diversity, fusion and fragmentation, held to be so frequent in American culture’ (1995, 291). James Nagel’s book, *The*

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10 Kennedy’s reference to chaos theory is interesting. The definition of chaos theory in the *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*—‘that the smallest of changes in a system can result in very large differences in that system's behaviour’ (Robert Bishop 2009) adds weight to claims put forward in this thesis that the short story cycle reflects the experiences of human subjects situated within interconnecting and often unavoidable relationships that shape personal and collective identifies.
contemporary American short-story cycle: the ethnic resonance of genre (2001), while still limiting the scope of the field to American texts, in other ways departs from previous studies concerned with identifying the uniqueness of the form, to examine how it is being used to explore issues of ethnicity and identity. For the purposes of this research which takes into account women’s social situation and focuses on a text by an Aboriginal writer, Nagel’s findings warrant greater consideration.

Like previous scholars, Nagel concurs that the central idea of linked short narratives predates the formal western novel, a concept which matured in the eighteenth century, and the short story, which evolved as distinct from the tale or sketch in the nineteenth century (2001, 3). Further, he adds that, as a more ancient and fundamental narrative unit, the story is more closely linked to oral traditions than the extended narrative line of the novel, and is therefore particularly cross-cultural (2001, 3–4). In spite of this heritage, however, Nagel believes there exists a remarkable stubbornness amongst scholars to recognise the short story cycle’s uniqueness: what he describes as an ‘obdurate critical innocence of this legacy’ (2001, 8). For instance, in response to reviews of Ernest Hemingway’s short story cycle In our time (1924), and William Faulkner’s Knight’s gambit (1949), which treat the structure of these texts with ‘surprise’ as though they are newly invented, Nagel says:

What was ‘peculiar’ was not the notion of a volume of stories with unifying characters and themes but the fact that such eminent commentators on the current state of modern letters should have been
oblivious to the important role that the short-story cycle had recently assumed (2001, 1). 11

From this position Nagel moves quickly to his central premise that developments in the short story cycle from the late nineteenth century saw the form become popular amongst male and female writers and across ethnic groups. Thus, by the last decades of the twentieth century the form had come to be associated with difference and diversity, and writers were using the cycle to explore issues around ethnicity and cultural identity, reflecting the multiculturalism of the United States (2001, 2–8). Nagel claims:

One of the most fascinating aspects of the contemporary fictional cycle is that writers from a wide variety of ethnic groups have used the form for the depiction of the central conflicts of characters from their own race or nationality. As ‘American’ narratives, these stories often involve the process of immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, assimilation, identity formation, and the complexities of formulating a sense of self that incorporates the old world and the new, the central traditions of the country of origin integrated into, or in conflict with, the values of the country of choice (2001, 15).


11 Although the two reviews were published twenty-five years apart, both Hemingway’s critic, Edmund Wilson, and Faulkner’s, Malcolm Cowley, propose the respective author had invented a new style of writing (Nagel, 2001, 1). Their comments suggest that indeed, little was being done during the intervening years to foster greater awareness of the tradition of the short story cycle.
things they carried (1990) and Robert Olen Butler’s A good scent from a strange mountain (1992). While these texts share a focus on characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds and explore issues of race and identity, class and culture, a further point of interest is that most of these cycles are written by women exploring the experiences of ordinary women and girls. Further, these cycles emphasise relational identity as the central protagonists negotiate many relationships that impact on them variously.

The next section shows that further research into how the form is being used, and the impact it is making, particularly in relation to questions of gender, has more recently emerged in PhD scholarship. I look at some of these projects and critical attention given to the form in Australia as a foundation to the textual study of Leane’s Purple threads.

Further critical studies: the United States and Australia

The central argument of Karen Weekes’ doctoral thesis, ‘Creating a self: identity in contemporary women’s short story cycles’ (2000) is that the form is particularly useful for reflecting the dramatic fracturing of the self. Both men and women experience themselves pulled in myriad directions, and this is an important feature of literature in general in the postmodern era (Weekes, 2000, 1). Nevertheless, Weekes claims that women experience this fragmentation in gender-specific ways that highlight the difficulties, explored in Chapter One, for women whose lived experiences contradict traditional notions of autonomy:
The situation for women is exacerbated by outdated sociological imperatives that are rarely practical or even desirable in the 1960s and beyond. These expectations of docility and relative passivity are in opposition to drives towards autonomy, so girls develop an internal conflict as they mature and explore their opportunities. To be assertive and ambitious, they must eschew the stereotypical traits of their gender, a choice not required of males (2000, 1).

Further, Weekes draws on Sue Llewelyn and Kate Osborne to argue that women struggle with the conflicting demands of their own needs, and those of others with whom they are involved in relationships of interdependence and care, and that ‘the resultant conflicts and guilt no matter what decision contemporary females make, has become central to their lives’ (Weekes, 2000, 4). Many short story cycles by contemporary women writers (such as Lorrie Moore’s *Anagrams* (1986)), Weekes claims, explore these conflicting tensions, through individual stories unified by a central female protagonist that explore her experiences in a variety of roles. Weekes remarks:

The short story cycle allows the author to emphasize different aspects of a central character’s personality or present various formative experiences that gain resonance by their juxtaposition with each other, eventually presenting a three dimensional portrait (2000, 16).

This portrait, she goes on to explain, shows the character struggling to develop a distinct concept of herself, trying ‘to balance an increasing number of demands while also attempting to avoid being engulfed by guilt and feelings of failure both in terms of gender and culture’ (2000, 17).

Rachel Lister is also interested in the short story cycle and matters of gender representation in the form. Her doctoral thesis, ‘Open destinies: modern American women and the short story cycle’ (2005), examines how women writers from the United States (including Eudora Welty and Grace Paley)
have used the form to represent and question gender identity. In subsequently published research she claims that the plurality and openness of the form, challenging boundaries and opening up possibilities for new beginnings and new identities, create environments where female characters typically thrive, yet where male characters are often immobilised, finding ‘themselves stranded with nowhere to go’ (2007, para 29). Through both of these works, aspects of identity resonate with the relational self. The subject relates differently to various others in different situations and contexts, and different aspects of identity become salient. Thus, women’s practised experiences encourage them to embrace relational connections. By doing so, they forge autonomous identities within the social context in which they are embedded, in the very processes of engaging with the relationships they have inherited or embraced, rather than in abstraction from these.  

In Australia, the creative production of the form appears to be well ahead of any sustained critical evaluation. For example, Frank Moorhouse published several collections of linked stories subtitled ‘a discontinuous narrative’, including *Futility and other animals* (1969), *The Americans, baby* (1972) and *The electrical experience* (1974). In discussing these and other works

12 As I complete this research project I notice a proliferation of theses concerned with the short story cycle produced in recent years. Predominantly the output of MFA programmes in the United States and Canada, they cover a wide range of subject matter, including the intersectionality of gender, race and class (Thomas, 2013); the experiences of Filipino migrants (Luib, 2013) and women’s lives (Vong, 2013 and Dorland Perry, 2014). Interestingly, Jennifer Smith proposes that the proliferation of short story cycles in the United States is evidence of the influence of the MFA program on contemporary literature, claiming that: ‘the workshop setting may indeed be an ideal forum for producing and honing the cycle … [because] in fiction-writing workshops the short story is the preferred form, due to the reasonable possibility of producing, workshopping, and revising a story. Further, the repetition of workshops across semesters may well induce or encourage writers to return to a character, setting, or theme as they move toward a collection, novel, or cycle’ (2012, np).
by the author, Brian Kiernan implies that the interlinking of the characters and themes, whereby ‘the effect is that … [the stories] imply an elusive pattern of interaction, one in which connections are not made as they would be in a traditional novel’ (1981, 75), is unique, claiming that Moorhouse made the form his ‘distinctive … means of structuring his fictions’ (1981, 74). Several years later, however, Gay Raines claims that Moorhouses’s linked story collections ‘have continued the “journey of the [short story cycle] form”’ (1990, 432), and have ‘a “closed” aspect which suggests that it is more accurate to describe them as developments of the short story cycle rather than as “discontinuous narratives”’ (1990, 426). In another example, Thea Astley’s *It’s raining in Mango: pictures from the family album* (originally 1989), which tells the story of four generations of the Laffey family in far north Queensland, is frequently referred to as a novel, although it is actually a set of distinct stories (see, for example, Lever, 2004, 17, and Barnes, 2012). And more recently, Tim Winton’s *The turning* (2004), is described on the paperback version’s cover as seventeen overlapping stories, with no further suggestion that this feature makes the text other than a collection of short stories. Nonetheless, *The turning* can easily be viewed as a short story cycle, linked by the common setting of the fictionalised town Angelus, themes of voyage and return, the importance of place in developing identity, and several characters who appear and reappear in different stories. In one article on Winton’s text, scholar Stephen Torre details the effect of the interconnectedness of the independent stories, without reference to the short story cycle form. He claims that
to enhance the authenticity of his study of turning, Winton employs complex narrative strategies. The theoretical model most appropriate to a hermeneutic of Winton’s structured series of stories is Wolfgang Iser’s reader response work … In *The turning* reading involves responses not only to the individual stories, the ‘within’ the story response, but also to the framing structure which emerges in the interaction of individual stories with each other. Not only the ‘blanks’, as Iser calls them, *within* the stories, but also the blanks *between* the stories, in the structure built out of the interaction of seventeen stories, determine reader participation in the text (2009, 282).

Wolfgang Iser’s notion of blanks, as Torre uses it here, is echoed in Chapter Three of this thesis when recognised characteristics of short story cycle are explored for their potential to represent women’s relational lives. In this thesis, these blanks are referred to as silences that typically resound throughout cycles, leaving readers to make connections between unresolved threads and draw conclusions, where possible.

This lack of sustained attention to the short story cycle in established literary scholarship in Australia may indicate that there is little precedence here for discussing the form as a distinct genre worthy of critical examination. Nevertheless, this trend may now be disrupted as a result of

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14 In November 2011 I made some enquiries, via email, to find out how the Australian Literature Resource was categorising short story cycles. I learnt that the database was not specifically using that term as a distinct genre at that time. Books that I would have classified as short story cycles could be found indirectly, for instance, through the search term “sequence” in conjunction with “short story”. Since my initial enquiry, AustLit has begun using “short story cycle” as a search term in its own right. Further, following my interview with Leane, Black Words, a community of Indigenous writers, storytellers, academics and researchers that works in partnership with the Australian Literature Resource, hosted during 2013 a resource map on the AustLit database called “Short story cycles: Aboriginal perspectives on Australia in the twentieth century”. The map listed, along with *Purple threads*, the following short story cycles by Indigenous writers: *Swallow the air*, (2006) by Tara June Winch, *Me, Antman and Fleabag*, (2006) by Gayle Kennedy, and *Every secret thing*, (2009) by Marie Munkara.
the work of some postgraduate research undertaken in Australian universities. For instance, Kenneth Chan produced a creative writing doctoral thesis entitled ‘Chinese history books and other stories’ (2005), which examines how the discourses of the dominant culture in America and Australia have framed Chineseness. Chan’s thesis includes a fictional cycle of nine linked stories about a Chinese family who have migrated to Sydney. These stories explore the function of memory in the creation of family narratives, asking the question: who holds the “truth” in a family? Of his purpose in writing the fiction in this form Chan says:

Composing a linked cycle of stories has given me the opportunity to extend the short story form, especially by giving me scope to expand the lives of the characters beyond a single story. The lives of the characters can take on greater complexity since they confront challenges at different stages of their lives from different perspectives (2005, iv).

Further in the creative component of the thesis, the fictional narrator says:

These are family stories and I have assigned myself the task of recording things as they have been recounted to me but the task is elusive and nothing has a solid core, a central, hard patina that I can grasp and feel and say, with a degree of satisfaction, that is how it was or must have been (2005, Part II, 6).

In a novel, a writer can convey this same sense of the fragmentary recollections inherent in family history, but the short story cycle itself reinforces, by means of its structure, such patterns of return, the going over again in one’s mind of the same events, and the relational processes by which family knowledge is collectively constructed.
Victoria Kuttainen also conducted doctoral research into the short story cycle and settler fictions in Australia, Canada and the USA, later published as *Unsettling stories: settler postcolonialism and the short story composite* (2010). Kuttainen argues that the form, by virtue of its own structure of discontinuous stories that share unstable borders, is well-suited to expressing the ‘lingering anxieties about boundary management’ (2010, 5) which is a feature of settler societies where Indigenous groups and other marginalised communities remain sidelined by the dominant narratives of the nation, particularly those that focus on an expression of a national identity and voice (2010, 3). The book examines several short story cycles organised around tropes of the family, the small town, home, history and trauma. In the last of these, Winton’s *The turning* is drawn on as an exemplary text that invokes ‘the forms of trauma testimony such as fragmentation, dislocation, repetition, and belatedness in recycling historical material from the national past for the purposes of fiction’ (2010, 17). In discussing Olga Masters’s *A long time dying* (1985), Kuttainen’s comments resonate with my own interest in the potential of the short story cycle to articulate women’s experiences of the mundane. She remarks that by focusing myopically on small, isolated details and fragments of story, the micro-narratives of Masters’s homely tales assemble, as if by pointillism, a picture of home as an idyll-in-miniature, a lost paradise that nurtures the myth of a separate female domain uncorrupted by metropolitan values and politics (2010, 15).

While this thesis in no way seeks to emulate romanticised, gender-restrictive views of home life or homemaking, it is interested in women’s ambivalent

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15 I suggest that the current and previous Australian federal governments’ handling of the arrival of asylum seekers by boat to the continent indicates that as a nation we are still grappling with, as Kuttainen puts it, “boundary trouble” (2010, 1).
experiences of the mundane and the relationships they sustain in these spaces.

These examples of recent scholarly attention to the short story cycle suggest to me that critical appreciation of the form is growing. This is occurring alongside the form’s popularity amongst a number of contemporary fiction writers. *Purple threads* is only one example within an expanding field of short story cycles by Australian writers, which includes Gretchen Shirm’s *Having cried wolf* (2010a) and Jess Huon’s *The dark wet* (2011). Interestingly, Shirm acknowledges the influence of other ‘interwoven story collections,’ including *The turning*, on her writing (Shirm, 2010b). Also, in a review of *The dark wet*, writer and lecturer Kalinda Ashton notes that ‘linked short stories or “novels in stories” … have a stronger place in American publishing … [but are] experiencing a revival in Australia’ (2012, 20).16

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a selective overview of short story cycle scholarship in the past forty years. It has highlighted the key concerns of this field—the naming of the form and determination of its core features—established that interest in the form is strongest in the United States, but that more recently attention is growing in Australia amongst researchers and

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16 Ashton’s article appears in *The weekend Australian review* opposite my own review of *Purple threads* (Kadmos, 2012). At the time of writing the review, while still in the early stages of my research, finding scant precedence for the use of the term short story cycle in Australian forums and having a restricted word limit for the review, I admit that I too settled on the descriptor linked stories rather than risk using a term that might confuse the readership.
writers of fiction. It has also shown that this newer research is interested in how the form functions in specific ways—to explore relations of gender and/or ethnicity and the impacts of colonialism, for instance. These points about the short story cycle lay the foundation for this project’s concern with the potential of the form to represent women’s transformations through the experiences of their daily lives as individuals situated in specific social and historical contexts, connected through webs of relationships that demand from them obligations and responsibilities. In the next chapter, I suggest that the feminist notion of “the wave” is a helpful concept when considering the imaginative ways in which the short story cycle represents these aspects of women’s lives, and look closely at other features of the form that support these ends.
Telling women’s stories through the short story cycle

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how the short story cycle can be used to tell stories about women’s ordinary lives by representing relational aspects of women’s intersectional identities, and how women come to a greater sense of who they are within the context of relationships—some enduring, others not—over time. This chapter, which looks more closely at how the short story cycle achieves this, proposes that the feminist notion of the wave resonates with the processes of personal transformation often found in short story cycles about women. As previously explained, Susan Garland Mann claims that the only defining feature of the form is the simultaneous independence and interrelatedness of the stories within the cycle. This chapter highlights other characteristics, seen variously across the range of short story cycles, which arise from this basic structure. These include the ways that time and temporality may function differently in a cycle; the mosaic narrative structure of the form; the way the cycle accommodates narrative silences and resists narrative closure; and the function of the longer story within the cycle. The claims made in this chapter are illustrated with examples drawn from a selection of cycles. Many women writers in the west have used the form for telling women’s stories, including the writers mentioned in the previous two chapters and others. Cycles by Alice Munro, Gloria Naylor and Elizabeth Strout are
drawn on in this chapter to explore how the cycle can privilege storytelling about women and the relationships that make their lives meaningful.

**The short story cycle and “the wave”**

As mentioned in Chapter One, developments in feminist thinking throughout the 1980s and 1990s—commonly referred to as the third wave of feminism—are important for this discussion of the representation of women’s lives in the short story cycle. As we will see, not all feminists agree with the justification for wave terminology to describe the history of feminism and changes in feminist thought, but this thesis posits that the wave functions well as a metaphor for the way the short story cycle represents relationality and personal transformation in women’s lives. A closer inspection of the language used by feminist scholars in reference to the wave helps to illuminate the metaphorical possibilities of the term.

Lise Shapiro Sanders claims that third wave feminists ‘see their work as founded on second wave principles, yet distinguished by certain cultural and political differences’ (2004, 51). Yet almost a decade earlier, Gina Dent remarked that the generational language implied by the notion of waves ‘hides other differences within it—national trajectories, sexual orientation, professional status, etc.’ (1995, 70). Feminist theorist Elaine Showalter is cautious about wave terminology for a different reason, arguing that ‘a wave suggests movement,’ yet that the specific issues and strong leadership that are capable of inspiring unity and collective action, thereby justifying the categorisation of a wave, do not exist at present in contemporary western
society (in Gillis and Munford, 2004, 60–3). Susan Archer Mann and Douglas Huffman also caution that the tendency to focus on common themes unifying each wave can obscure the diversity of competing feminisms that exist, and, echoing Showalter, claim that ‘the wave metaphor only makes sense when it is used to describe mass-based movements that ebb and flow, rise and decline, and crest in some concrete, historical accomplishments or defeats’ (2005, 58). Nevertheless, Archer Mann accepts that whether or not ‘this oceanography of feminist waves is even useful … the third wave has become the banner under which many women identify their new brand of feminism’ (2013, 56).

While feminists disagree over the appropriateness of wave terminology to describe changes in feminist theory and action, the wave, imbued with descriptors such as diversity, ebb and flow, crest, movement and action, can be an apt metaphor for how women’s identities transform through the accumulation of minor experiences over time, represented so well in the short story cycle. This is because its unique structural design of collected, and connected, individual short stories de-emphasises the importance of

17 One exponent of wave terminology is self-proclaimed third-wave feminist Naomi Wolf. Wolf indicates that she is quite happy to acknowledge the existence of not only third-, but even fourth-wave feminists and so on (Wolf, 2008). I see this potential proliferation of categories of feminists as one problem of the generational framework, encouraging an ongoing rebuttal of the previous generation’s claims and achievements, and a belief that not only is it possible, but desirable, for contemporary feminists to distinguish themselves and the direction of their work, from earlier feminists. Of this potentially divisive pattern Susan Faludi, well-known for her seminal book, Backlash: the undeclared war against American women (1991) asks: ‘but to what end? To create a tabula rasa, where the past is no longer usable and one can become or unbecome anything? Where everything is relative, indeterminate, and a “choice” as valid as any other choice? In other words, the weightless, ahistorical realm of the commercial, a realm that promises its inhabitant a perpetual nursery where no one has to grow up’ (2010, 42).
linearity in the text, privileging instead the interweaving, spiralling, cyclical processes of relationality.

Nagel, for instance, draws on the historical meaning of cycle, as a collection of verse or narratives that centre on an outstanding event or character (2001, 1–2) to claim that ‘in most [short story cycles], “sequentiality” is the least important aspect of the groupings of stories within a volume. The relationships among stories in a short-story cycle is far more complex than the simple following of one another in sequence’ (2001, 12). In this sense, the cycle is not a complete or enclosed circle, but comprises patterns of return and revision. Development in the short story cycle often occurs through forward and returning movements that rest not necessarily in the place of origin, but slightly to the side. Jennifer Smith describes the movement in these terms:

These volumes are not cyclical in the sense that they always begin and end in the same ways or that they go through symmetrical stages. … rather, short-story cycles engage recursive, or cyclical, elements. A more accurate metaphor might be that of the helix, as the stories circle without exact repetition. The linking structures serve as axes around which the stories curve (2011, 2–3).

This image of the spiralling helix reflects graphically aspects of women’s experiences of mundane, ordinary life. The appearance of repetitiveness in daily life may hide subtle transformations that women nevertheless experience as they journey through the longer course of their lives. The image of a wave resonates with both Nagel’s notion of cycle and Smith’s helix, while at the same time accommodating the diversity of women’s experiences that is a crucial tenet of contemporary feminism. Lister claims
that the form actually ‘privileges plurality and openness. It contests
boundaries and enacts the possibility of multiple beginnings and renewable
identities’ (2007, para 1). This plurality and renewable potential is found in
the “oceanography” of human experience: a constantly shifting, never-
repeating movement of waves. At times this movement can be powerful,
almost dangerous, at others gentle and soothing. There is also, at the point
of impact when each wave hits the sand, some backwash, or backlash,
where the force of the water’s reach is lessened and some reabsorption
occurs. In this return there is a re-visioning, partly fuelled by the wave that
is now spent, and the new water that follows, from which something new is
created.

By incorporating both return and renewal (repetitions and connections that
occur throughout the cycle in independent contexts) into its narrative
structure, the short story cycle can privilege the connections which women
may value over the courses of their lives, to their pasts, and presents—both
the events that occur and the relationships they encounter—as they move
forward into their futures. The form embraces the enriching aspects of
relational interdependence. Ingram describes this in terms that resonate with
the image of the individual wave subsumed into the wider sea, and the
principles of relational autonomy: ‘Every story cycle displays a double
tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand
and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many
into a single whole’ (1971, 19). In this way the form lends itself to bringing
together stories of dramatic weight and those with more subtle significance,
the minutiae of the everyday. As Weekes claims, the structure of contemporary women’s short story cycles ‘replicates the complex structure of women’s identities: it reflects attempts to connect these fragments in a meaningful way, to create a fulfilling and unified self’ (2003, 96). Further, she says that:

Rather than a linear progress toward autonomy and independence, females’ identities are continually re-formed, allowing women to fluctuate between stages of development in response to the demands of relationships and maternal nurturing (2003, 98).

Such potential of the short story cycle make it an exciting form to work with and a rich repository for the diverse expressions of women’s lives.

Domestic, private time in the short story cycle

Feminism and domesticity

The focus on the mundane and the importance of relationships in women’s lives is not an attempt to return to outdated notions that restrict women’s aspirations and opportunities to domesticity and the family. It would be futile to ignore that, for decades now, experiences in the public domain and paid work have been vitally important to many women’s sense of autonomy and identity. Nevertheless, while embracing the principle that women’s experiences—biologically, socially, emotionally—are not universal, I still contend that, for the most part, women share some experiences that are defined by their gendered identities.18 In western societies, many women will spend some part of their lives in domestic spheres performing unpaid

18 As short story cycle writer Joyce Carol Oates remarks: “Though I don’t believe that there is a distinctly “female” sensibility, I know, of course, that there has been a female fate” (in Lister, 2007, para 3).
tasks as homemakers or as carers of young children, the sick or elderly. In these spaces, an individual subject’s relation to time may be experienced differently to the way it is experienced in the world of paid work, where tasks are typically tied to economic productivity. Through techniques that accommodate alternative representations of the passage of time, the short story cycle emphasises relational rather than individual experiences of the world. John Gerlach describes how the cycle works in this way:

In a story cycle … character begins to dissolve into theme; people are not as important as the forces which move them. Time begins to become cyclical, not linear, no longer under the sway of the strong force of sequential plot and individual character, aspects that are so important to our sense of the novel. The novel would seem to stem from the Romantic and post-Romantic conception of the individual, while the story cycle harks back to those older conceptions of man as an actor in a cosmic drama (1992, 58).

This section draws on feminist discussions about domestic work, and the ideas of sociologist Barbara Adam and other theorists of gender and time to argue that the short story cycle opens spaces where the transformations enabled by mundane experiences can be more fully appreciated.

Throughout the twentieth century some feminists had difficulty theorising the role of the housewife and the homemaker in any positive light. For French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, whose description of domestic work in post-war Europe in The second sex (1949/2010) is bleak and appalling, the work of home making and child care was entirely oppressive to women, locking them into an existence that enabled men and children to experience “transcendence” or the expression of their individual subjectivity. By
comparison, women’s work, while necessary for sustaining life, represented the temporal stagnation of immanence. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young summarises de Beauvoir’s attitude thus:

The temporality of immanence is cyclical, repetitive. As the movement of life it moves in species time unpunctuated by events of individual meaning. The cycles go around, from spring to summer to fall to winter, from birth to death and birth to death. Beauvoir describes the activity of housework as living out this cyclical time, a time with no future and no goals (1997, 148).

Feminist responses towards women’s domestic work continued to be conflicting throughout the twentieth century and are still debated today. During the height of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, some versions of second-wave feminism presented domesticity as an existence that women had to leave behind in order to become emancipated. However, not all feminist scholars agree with this view, and some encourage new ways of thinking about domestic work as it is experienced by both women and men that counter de Beauvior’s negative reading of the repetitive, cyclical patterns inherent in the private, domestic sphere. For example, Young, while conceding it is important not to romanticise the activities of housework and home making (1997, 154), asks, ‘is it possible to retain an idea of home as supporting the individual subjectivity of the person, where the subject is understood as fluid, partial, shifting, and in relations of reciprocal support with others?’ (1997, 141). Linda Barclay directly counters assumptions that domestic work and caring are

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counterproductive to personal autonomy by reframing autonomy within a relational context:

Traditionally, women’s lives have been devoted to the care of others, and if anything the problem has been to find a space for the expression and pursuit of one’s own interests. The relationship of a parent to child, the traditional conception of what it is to be a wife, or caring for a frail and aging parent can hardly be characterized as a form of cooperation for the efficacious pursuit of self-interest. Feminist theory has contributed to the development of alternative theory, which focuses moral concern more on the qualities and activities appropriate to care of others than on legitimizing individual rights as the means for protecting individuals from one another. They have argued that as we are in fact selves characterized as much by our capacity for care and concern for others as by our self-interest, we need moral and political theories that are shaped according to this fact (2000, 59).

Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd raise similar concerns, arguing that feminist theories must continue to address inequalities around perceptions of and reward for work undertaken in and outside the home, by men and women, without perpetuating a narrative that alienates women from their own lived experiences:

Gender is recognised as just one determinant of identity and feminists have many different affiliations. But it is also clear that the tensions for women between achievement and domesticity have not been resolved by a story that calls on women to leave their ‘home selves’ behind. As a biographical solution to what are fundamental systematic contradictions and tensions between the way home life and work life are organised in contemporary society, this narrative no longer works and we need to find other ways to understand and face the dilemmas involved (2004, 15).

The argument presented in this thesis supports a similarly flexible view of domesticity, which encompasses different experiences based on class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, and asserts that personal, intellectual or spiritual transformation is as readily available to individuals in their private, unpaid
roles, as it is to people engaged in more public or socially, politically and economically influential pursuits. Further, it claims that time in the domestic sphere may be experienced as less ordered and more susceptible to the unpredictability of relationships of obligation and dependence. The short story cycle, liberated from the restraints of overarching plot development and a cumulative sequence of causes and effects, may thus suitably convey time passing in the ordinary moments of people’s lives.

Time

Feminist scholarship has dealt extensively with how notions of time have been used to control communities, establish privilege and marginalise and undervalue experiences that operate outside of the parameters of official, acceptable, measured time. For instance, Rita Felski claims that feminist thinking about time can be shaped around four forms: redemption, regression, repetition and rupture, all patterns which ‘reach beyond the empty, mechanical measure of clock time’ (2002, 21). Her thoughts on time as repetition are particularly relevant for this discussion about the short story cycle:

Anthropologists often stress the importance of ritual in the non-Western experience of time. Here, repetition is valued as a treasured link to an imagined community of ancestors that transcends historical time. In modernity, by contrast, repetition is often the enemy. It is viewed with distrust, or even with horror. It is a sign of dull compulsion, grey routine, the oppressive regimen of natural or man-made cycles. It threatens the existential dream of authentic self-creation by yoking the self to a preordained pattern (2002, 25).

Sociologist and time studies scholar Barbara Adam remarks that machine-time, a human creation,
sits uneasily with the lived times of everyday life, the reproductive, sustaining and caring work that is primarily the domain of women across the world, and the processes of nature that are transformed by the temporal imposition and colonization (2006, 119).

Of course, women are not the only people in society who dwell on the margins of clock-time. Adam argues that:

While clock-time dominates the world of work and the global economy, the great majority of the world’s people function in the shadows of the time economy of money. Children and the elderly, the unemployed, carers the world over and subsistence farmers of the majority world inhabit the shadowlands of un- and undervalued time. Women dwell there in unequal numbers. Their time does not register on the radar of commodified time. Their work is not accorded value in the capitalist scheme of things. Rather, it is rendered invisible. As ‘unproductive’ work it is relegated to the shadow of capitalist production, beyond reach and concern (2006, 124).

Alison Bartlett, on the experience of maternal time, claims that ‘western cultures have inherited and interiorized an understanding of time as linear, incremental and developmental, which values climactic events, dates and heroes of history while erasing the quotidian and those who do the work of the everyday’ (2010, 121). Further, Bartlett claims, “normal time” signifies time in paid work, whereby motherhood is positioned as a temporary aside from this productive use of time. This idea is reinforced by the concept of the term “maternity leave”, which implies that maternal time is ‘liminal, temporary and transitory’ (2010, 127). Fiction writer and scholar Julienne van Loon found this to be the case in her own experience. She claims that as an adult she had accepted that her ‘days were organised by a model based

\[\text{20} \text{ Indeed, a common phrase used by mothers engaged with the full-time care of their children is that they are “out of the workforce”. This phrase reinforces the notion of being temporarily non-productive. And yet Bartlett asserts that maternal work can be productive in its own way. Of the early years following the birth of a baby, she says: “The blur of babydaze, I want to argue, signals an encounter with the real that can be potentially productive in ways that are not available to the focused, progressive, outcomes-based trajectory of “normal” rational calendar workdays” (2010, 121).}\]
on plans, objectives, outcomes’ which provided ‘structure and a sense of purpose’ (2011, np). However, following the birth of her baby, ‘one of the biggest adjustments [she] had to make [was] to arrive at a new understanding of time, one measured only by the fragile, mutable pattern of basic human needs: sleep, food, warmth, contact’ (2011, np).

As a cyclical narrative form, the short story cycle actively resists the dominance of linear time (and its associations with progress) as the only, acceptable determinant of successful development. By paying closer attention to smaller moments in the unremarkable and sometimes repetitive activities of everyday life, fragments of experience and isolated themes, while still telling a larger story or grappling with broader themes as a whole, the stories reveal the longer-term outcomes of the events explored as the cycle unfolds. In this way, far from representing the stagnation of cyclical motion as articulated in de Beauvoir’s vision, the short story cycle can portray time in relation to a character’s narrative as irregular, provisional, and relational. These representations of time readily accommodate lapses in the narrative action of the stories, resist climactic moments, and are inextricably linked to other structural features of the short story cycle that make it suitable for exploring women’s lives, such as its mosaic narrative structure and the focus on minor narrative arcs.21

21 According to Elizabeth Fallaize de Beauvoir herself used the short story cycle form to write about women—The woman destroyed (1967) and When things of the spirit come first (1979). Of the three female characters in the first of these books, Fallaize says: ‘Taken separately, the sources of their errors may appear individual; taken together, however, the ways in which these three women use words to build myths about their roles as wives and mothers, to conceal from themselves the passage of time, to cover over the difficulties that they have in relating to their bodies, becomes an insistent pattern—an indication of a common “situation” as women’ (1988, 171–2).
Mosaic narrative structure—the focus on smaller moments in time: The beggar maid and Olive Kitteridge

The work of novelist and creative writing teacher Madison Smartt Bell on narrative design in western fiction provides some further insights into how the short story cycle’s structure of independent yet interrelated stories sets itself apart from longer, continuous narratives, and supports storytelling about women’s relational lives. His comments are not directed towards the short story cycle as such, but they are useful for this discussion by highlighting how the form emphasises relationality in cycles about women.

Drawing on the Freytag triangle (the classic graphic representation of conventional story progression, connecting the three points between exposition, climax and resolution, so that the vertical axis represents plot, and the horizontal axis, time), Bell argues that the form of linear narrative design conveyed by the triangle dominates thinking about narrative structure. He admits that all stories bear some relationship to this structure, although not necessarily in the neat way the triangle promises, which supposes that the plot is the primary structural element in the story, and that the events in the story will be told in chronological order. Hence, the triangle represents the progress of events over time, and thus describes a process of motion (1997, 29).\(^2\) This holds true for narratives that are bound by time and sequence. The narrative follows a sequence of causes and effects, much like, Bell says, a row of falling dominoes. The reader is held

\(^2\)Freytag’s triangle, or pyramid, was developed by German writer and critic, Gustav Freytag, and introduced in his book, Die Technik des Dramas (1863) (Buzzard and Lepan, 2014, 62).
to attention by the suspenseful anticipation (however slight) of ‘what’s gonna happen?’ (1997, 30). While there are numerous variations on linear design, narratives based on this form will, at some level, be future oriented, pointing the direction to some ultimate, if only provisional, outcome.

But not all narratives follow this model. To illustrate what he describes as modular narrative design, Bell likens the writer to a mosaicist, who is concerned with assembling the final work out of smaller, component parts (1997, 213). Therefore, while linear design is a process of movement, modular design is a process of assembly. In this approach, the writer handles the raw material in a more fragmentary way. While some linear narratives may make significant jumps across time and place, in modular designed narratives, such as many short story cycles, these transitions are sometimes more radical. As well as shifting temporal and geographical locations, modular narratives may be characterised by disruptions to the storyline, including changes in point of view from one central character to another, or differences in voice and tone. Bell claims that this non-linear structure may be ‘an attractive way to show relationships between events or people or motifs or themes which are not generated by sequences of cause and effect’ and that therefore, the form is often inseparable from the very meaning of the text (1997, 216).

Echoing Bell’s notion of mosaic narrative design, scholar María Jesús Hernáez Lerena claims that Alice Munro’s short story cycle, The beggar maid, is less bound by the novelistic requirements of continuity and cause–
effect relationships, with linear chronology less important as a means to achieve coherence (1996, 11). She remarks: ‘Continuity is not chronological but thematic: there is not a description of the process of the character’s fate, but a juxtaposition of moments that may produce several effects: incongruence, surprise, irony’ (1996, 19). The stories in Munro’s text do piece together the overall trajectory of the main protagonist, Rose—from poor girl in country Canada living with her father and stepmother Flo, through university education, marriage and eventual divorce, motherhood and career as an actress. However, rather than articulating these events in the form of a conventional linear narrative—where the specific set of events narrated are bound by a sequence of causes and effects that move logically toward a particular outcome, often representing a defining experience for the principal character—the stories in *The beggar maid* are not offered to the reader with the same sense of predictability or certainty. While this particular collection of tales is told about Rose, the reader senses that as many other stories from Rose’s life could have been drawn together to explore similar themes. Not every story in this text takes place in a single period in Rose’s life. Some stories jump back and forth over several years in order to illustrate an idea being developed in the story at hand. Through this process, characters who are central to one story, may disappear in another, may even have died, and yet reappear in a later story to illustrate a different idea (Hernáez Lerena, 1996, 14). In this way, Hernáez Lerena claims that the events ‘are put together around an idea or relational scheme, which
prevents their dispersal along a chronological line so as to exploit their capacity of analogy and contrast’ (1996, 18).

For example, the final story in the cycle, ‘Who do you think you are’, opens with: ‘There were some things Rose and her brother Brian could safely talk about, without running aground on principles or statements of position, and one of them was Milton Homer’ (Munro, 1991, 193), a young man from their hometown, Hanratty, whom the locals describe as being ‘“not all there”’ (197). The story immediately flashes back to an incident that, the reader is advised, occurred ‘long ago, before their father died and before Brian went to school’ (193). Rose recounts the visit by Milton, culminating in a mocking send-up of his manner, and unexpectedly the reader is made aware that the “present” tense of the story is well ahead of these recollections, that Rose and Brian are actually sharing this story with Brian’s wife, Phoebe: “Now that’s enough. That’s enough, Rose,” said Brian, but he laughed. He could put up with Rose’s theatrics when they were about Hanratty’ (195). The remainder of the story has Rose recalling, in present tense, other stories about Milton Homer as his life intersects with hers over many years, creating an immediacy to the these encounters. Yet the reader is reminded that Rose is remembering these events from the temporal distance of the narrative present when Phoebe is again brought

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23 In her larger argument Hernáez Lerena draws on Jonathan Culler’s ideas on the function of the apostrophe in rhetoric—a pause or breach in the communicator’s flow to address a second audience, idea or thing (1996, 11)—to claim that the apostrophe mirrors the treatment of characters in the short story cycle. She says: ‘In the stories of The Beggar Maid certain members of a community are held in a steady light temporarily; they are performers of a situation that will cease to exist in the next story … to a very great extent, characters are treated apostrophically’ (1996, 14; italics in original).
abruptly into the picture: “The village idiot,” said Phoebe, trying to comprehend these things, with her inexhaustible unappreciated politeness, and both Rose and Brian said that they had never heard him described that way’ (197). Rose’s final recollection of Milton Homer is a more recent one, articulated during a conversation with another old neighbour during a return to Hanratty. This other man, Ralph Gillespie, resists Rose’s attempts to draw him into her exaggerated reminiscing on the eccentricities of their poor, country home and its inhabitants, causing Rose to realise that her life-long tendency to talk about her home in this way has disguised a ‘peculiar shame which she carried around with her’ (209). Brought once again to the narrative present, the reader is told:

But when Rose remembered this unsatisfactory conversation [with Ralph Gillespie] she seemed to recall a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken … for these reasons Rose did not explain anything further about Ralph Gillespie to Brian and Phoebe when she recalled Milton [Homer] (209–10).

These flashes into Rose’s past resist chronological order because the idea or relational scheme they are brought together to explore is the focus of this particular story, and is crystallised in this final reflection. Here, Rose reconsiders a life-long tendency to disparage, and thus distance herself from, a childhood she fears is incompatible with the life she tries to forge for herself as an adult.

Illustrating Bell’s claim that the form is often inseparable from the meaning of the text, *The beggar maid*, through the many isolated incidents narrated in this and the other nine stories, conveys the idea that a subject’s story is a
mosaic of innumerable small experiences, interconnected with other people, that shape identity and develop ideas and beliefs about a subject, others and the world, and through which autonomous decisions are made. Munro herself remarks: ‘I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected, moments of experience’ (in Hernández Lerena, 1996, 9) because ‘I don’t see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time’ (in Hernández Lerena, 1996, 20).

The short story cycle’s capacity to accommodate these smaller moments in life, and to show how these experiences might subtly transform individuals, and their connection to others, over the long course of their lives, may make the form particularly effective for representing the experiences of older women who, according to some scholars, are underrepresented in narrative fiction. Australian writer and scholar Lyz Byrski, who has written several best-selling novels featuring older women, explains that she began writing fiction because she couldn’t find stories that reflected the diversity of ageing women’s lives:

I searched the shelves of libraries and bookshops which were packed with women’s popular fiction only to discover that women over fifty featured only as peripheral characters, usually negative and stereotypical; bossy, interfering mothers-in-law, nosey neighbours, crotchety spinsters, pathetic empty nesters, or feeble and demented burdens, hampering the lives of the really important people; men, younger women and children. Where, I wondered, were the stories of older, ageing and old women as central characters with interesting lives? (2010, 3)

Byrski draws on the work of Marilyn Poole and Susan Feldman (1999) and Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich (1983), who claim that feminism has ignored the issues of ageing for older women. Byrski’s novels include Gang of four (2005).
While Byrski sought to redress this imbalance through the novel, American writer Elizabeth Strout chose the short story cycle form to create a multifaceted story about a middle aged woman. *Olive Kitteridge* (2008) comprises thirteen stories which situate the central character within the web of relationships generated by her community on the coast of Maine in New England.\(^\text{25}\) While the title of the book flags that Olive—a maths teacher who is married to the town pharmacist, Henry, and has one son, Christopher—is the primary character in the book, she is not necessarily the focus in all of the stories. The first story, ‘Pharmacy’, concerns Henry and his innocent infatuation with one of his shop assistants and most of the action occurs at the pharmacy, yet Olive is referred to on numerous occasions throughout and the reader receives an early introduction to this complex woman through statements such as: ‘she had a darkness that seemed to stand beside her like an acquaintance that would not go away’ (Strout, 2008, 6); and ‘the possibility of Olive’s dying and leaving him alone gives [Henry] glimpses of horror he can’t abide’ (17). In one story Olive and Henry make only a fleeting appearance as they dine in the restaurant where the story’s protagonist, Angie, plays piano, yet in many other stories Olive takes a more central role in the dramas of her own or her neighbours’ lives, ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. She attends her son’s wedding even though she disapproves of his choice of bride; she counsels a young woman with anorexia nervosa; she lends a hand at the funeral of the husband of an

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\(^{25}\) *Olive Kitteridge* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2009.
ex-pupil of hers; and she and Henry are left shaken after being taken hostage in a hold-up at the local hospital. Variously, in many separate incidents, Olive emerges through her interactions with others—her relationships as a wife, mother, teacher, neighbour, and friend—as strong-willed, forthright, bossy, loyal, loving and kind. Reviewer, Susan Guaccero, puts it this way: ‘The author … reveals [Olive] to us in parts and evokes the sense of multiple self-states that unite to form her continuity and coherence over time … as she navigates the complex relational matrix of human experience’ (2010, 412).

The story ‘Security’ explores how complex the processes of negotiating often disparate needs and desires in relationships can be, processes that are often emotionally fraught when the subjects involved share a parent–child bond. Olive, now widowed and long retired, is visiting her son and his new wife and stepchildren in New York. Olive is pained by the distance—physical and emotional—that exists between her and Christopher, yet remains puzzled as to its cause. She is determined that this visit will reconnect them somehow, and is therefore pleased when a simple family walk they have all taken around the neighbourhood appears to have gone well. However, back in her basement bedroom in Christopher’s flat, Olive

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26 Scholar Mary Laga’s assessment of Olive Kitteridge aligns with Byrski’s criticisms of representations of older women in fiction. Laga remarks: ‘[Strout] portrays Olive in a very denigrating fashion, in sharp contrast to her affable aging husband, Henry. In fact, this book shows a flagrant gender bias that privileges aging men and opts for a mostly unsympathetic characterization of older women, as shown in the difference of affability, parenting skills and even sexual prowess between aging males and females’ (2011, 1972). However, while I accept that many of the representations of Olive resemble Byrski’s list of stereotypes of older women, Olive is nevertheless a complex character of emotional depth, whom I found myself drawn to, in spite of her disagreeable, unflattering qualities. Further, she is the central character of this cycle.
sees a stain on her blouse from ice cream she must have dribbled while out walking. The ‘happiness inside her [because] she was with her son’ (220) is instantly shattered by the terrifying realities that she is growing old, and that the dynamics of her relationship with her son and the level of dependence is changing. She realises she is becoming dependent on people whose love for her is not something she can be confident of:

A small feeling of distress took hold. They had seen this and not told her. She had become the old lady her Aunt Ora had been … her son should have pointed this out the minute it happened, as she would have to him … did they think she was just one more baby they were carting around? (226)

Sadly, Olive’s stubborn sensitivity destroys any pleasure she had previously had in the visit. The next morning Christopher finds her sitting in the backyard with her packed suitcase at her feet, refusing to respond to his suggestion that something must have happened to trigger her resolve to leave earlier than planned. Christopher’s prodding and Olive’s hurt fuel them both until they are embroiled in a bitter argument, each bringing forth deep-seated resentments it is apparent have been bottled up for years. Nothing is resolved: ‘Everything became blurry, not just her eyes. She said things, with more and more fury—and Christopher answered, calmly, still washing kitchen things calmly’ (230).

The beggar maid and Olive Kitteridge employ mosaic narrative structures to knit together a range of stories across time, drawing on many characters to explore different relationships that shape the lives of two complex women. In relation to The beggar maid, Hernández Lerena remarks that ‘there is no way to know how a woman has found herself in old age, how she has
become another woman, instead we are witnesses of the various—however disparate—manifestations of an individual’s personality’ (1996, 19). The observation can be equally applied to *Olive Kitteridge*, and the poignant image of Olive, feeling humiliated and afraid when she sees the ice cream stain in the mirror. The short story cycle’s ability to articulate the seemingly mundane can be a powerful technique for storytelling about women as they transform over the longer course of their lives. So too can its capacity to disrupt the notion that the impact of any event can be immediately determined, acknowledging instead that it may often take time for the fuller implications of a subjects’ experiences and decisions to be revealed, if at all. How the short story cycle resists narrative closure is examined in the next section.

**Resisting narrative closure: The women of Brewster Place**

Philosopher Noel Carroll claims that narrative closure, which ‘yields a feeling of completeness’ (2007, 2), while not present in all narratives (such as soap operas or national histories), is an important, and expected, aspect of very many narratives that are ‘created for aesthetic consumption’ (2007, 15). The text creates a series of questions for the reader, who is thereby motivated to continue reading, and is not satisfied until those questions are answered. Carroll contends, therefore, that ‘narrative closure is the result of a narrative structure’s answering of all the pressing questions it has stirred in the audience’ (2007, 15).
The short story cycle, however, due to its concentration on smaller, sometimes discontinuous events, will inevitably contain gaps between the stories of these individual moments. The expectation too, that each independent story will stand on its own, means that not every strand introduced in one story will necessarily be followed up in the next. Readers of the form, therefore, learn to be prepared for the possibility that not all their questions will be answered by the end of the text. Scholar Karen Castellucci Cox puts it this way:

Where the traditional reader is conditioned to discover through careful reading the cause of any given event or detail, the story cycle reader may never be satisfied on particular points. How some event came about or how another will be resolved rarely takes central importance as the story cycle manipulates and magnifies the capricious natures and radically shifting perspectives of whole communities of characters. Such a wide-ranging lens necessarily catches fragments rather than whole pictures, bringing into focus the critical interests of one character briefly only to move on to another character while the earlier focus fades (1998, 155).

Through this approach, the complexity and transformative potential of relationships and relational identities is thus reinforced. This is illustrated in Gloria Naylor’s *The women of Brewster Place* (1983), which comprises seven stories about different women who live, at some time or other, in a dilapidated apartment block in an unnamed city in the United States:

‘Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home’ (Naylor, 1983, 4). Residents include an older, motherly figure, Mattie Michael, young, idealistic Kiswana Browne who rejects her affluent upbringing to live at Brewster Place where she believes she can affect social
change, and a lesbian couple, Theresa and Lorraine. Each story focuses on
one of these residents, although other characters appear as their lives
intersect with the main character of interest. Nevertheless, once a character’s
“story” concludes, the reader may have no access to a fuller account of that
woman’s experiences. For example, in ‘The two’, Theresa and Lorraine are
the main characters, and the story explores their relationship and their
separate and shared struggles to deal with the inevitable prejudice they
encounter as lesbian women. Lorraine is portrayed as more sensitive than
Theresa, her self-confidence more vulnerable to the judgements of others.
The story reaches a horrific conclusion when Lorraine determines to
overcome her anxieties by attending a party on her own. On her way home,
she is gang-raped by a group of youths and in her traumatised and confused
state she lashes out and kills her friend Ben, the elderly caretaker. The
reader is left with this hopeless image:

Lorraine screamed and clawed at the motions that were running and
shouting from every direction in the universe. A tall, yellow woman
in a bloody green and black dress, scraping at the air, crying, ‘Please.
Please’ (173).

In the following, and final story, ‘The block party’, all the central characters
from the stories thus far are brought together, actually or imaginatively, in a
final dream-like scene, where they toil side by side to tear down the brick
wall that separates Brewster Place from the rest of the city: ‘Women flung
themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks,
spiked shoe heels … the bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and
relayed out of Brewster Place’(186). The scene restores some agency, if
only temporarily, to the women who have each suffered from the various and compounded effects of being women, black and poor. And yet the scene refuses to resolve some crucial narrative strands. For instance: what happened to Lorraine? Had the rape left her so mentally scarred that she was institutionalised? Or was she arrested and charged over Ben’s death? Did hers and Theresa’s rocky relationship survive the dual tragedies? Were the rapists brought to justice?

Silences like these, around characters or events, are commonplace in the short story cycle. Hernáez Lerena claims that the cycle reader is not frustrated by such gaps, or by the details that are not provided about characters that disappear or consequences that are pre-empted but never revealed. Rather, she remarks that ‘the reader is somehow reassured that continuity persists in spite of the gap; there has not been any breach in coherence because he recognizes that this restricted selection of very few elements from a lifespan reveals the direction of a voice, the workings of the narrator’s mind’ (1996, 19). The writer of the cycle does, however, need to compensate for disrupting a reader’s expectations that all the threads will be tied up, which can certainly be a motivator for the reader of conventional, longer narratives. This is often accomplished through the writer forging tantalising connections between the stories—whether by means of an event referred to in more than one tale, a character that reappears, a motif shared, or a theme reinforced—which, when encountered by the reader, bring about satisfaction of a different kind. Meaning-making is thus achieved through the connections readers forge in this process. In this way too, the short story
cycle reinforces the notion that individuals achieve personal and shared ends with others through relationships of dependency and care.

Drawing on psychoanalytic principles, Guaccero reinforces the idea that the narrative gaps in the short story cycle are spaces where the characters’ identities form. Of *Olive Kitteridge*, she remarks that, ‘Strout is able to “stand in the spaces” with her characters and portray them as one self while being many’ (2010, 414). As this thesis has been arguing, the mundane—incorporating alternative experiences of time, smaller dramas, and spaces between these experiences where little appears to be happening—can be powerfully transformative. The presence of silences around individual stories can be particularly significant when it comes to representing women’s lives, a theme explored more fully in Chapter Five in the discussion of *Purple threads*.

**The longer story: *The beggar maid***

A feature that does not necessarily arise in critical discussion about the short story cycle and can in no way be described as a defining feature of the form, but that I have found present in many cycles nonetheless, is the longer short story. Very often there is, within a cycle, one story that is considerably longer than the others. Within this longer story it seems as though the author is grappling with a particularly complex or pivotal issue that needs to be fully explored, and I argue that the short story cycle provides spaces for stories such as these that might otherwise, due to their length and the competitive restraints around publishing, struggle to reach a readership. In
my own short story cycle, ‘Five seeds’, the longer story, ‘Lemon tree’, depicts the central character, Connie, dealing with a crisis that threatens the foundations of her life as she knows it, and her very identity as a wife and mother. Paralysed physically and emotionally, Connie needs time at this crossroads to contemplate the challenges she faces, and to reflect on how she wants to respond. In this particularly undramatic story, the reader is invited to “hold the space” for Connie, and to be watchful for the subtle transformations that unfold, as ordinary characters perform the daily rituals that are part of home and community.

In *The women of Brewster Place* the longer story is ‘Mattie Michael’, which establishes that character as the primary figure whose presence is felt from the start of the cycle to its dramatic conclusion. Winton’s title story, ‘The turning’, at the heart of his cycle, tells the story of Raelene, a young mother who, during a brief friendship with a middle-class newcomer to the town, allows herself to imagine and test alternative realities and relationships for herself and her children beyond the narrow experiences prescribed by her class, educational and economic status, and the terror imposed on her by her abusive husband, Max. *Olive Kitteridge* takes in two stories of considerable length, ‘Starving’, and ‘Security’ which has already been shown to be thematically significant in the context of Olive’s personal journey.

Munro’s *The beggar maid* also has two long stories, ‘The beggar maid’, and the even longer ‘Mischief’. The latter, which explores Rose’s sexual identity, jumps back and forth over many years, tracing Rose’s relationships
with her close friend Jocelyn and Jocelyn’s husband, Clifford, with whom 
Rose falls in love and has a brief intimacy. Their relationship is only 
sexually consummated once, however, and that is many years after their 
affair. The progress of Rose and Clifford’s relationship is intertwined with 
Rose’s feelings about her marriage and motherhood and the acute sense of 
class inferiority that she is unable to shake off throughout her life, factors 
that cause her to spend much of her life adrift from the security that a strong 
sense of place—be it a physical home or emotionally fulfilling 
relationship—can provide. These issues are at the core of Rose’s story, and 
it is fitting, therefore, that they are explored in a story of this depth and 
breadth. When Rose finally sleeps with Clifford, it is in a different context 
to one she ever imagined as a young woman in love. Late one evening, after 
several drinks, Rose is drawn into a sexual encounter with both Jocelyn and 
Clifford. The next day she is confronted by a barrage of emotions as she 
reflects on the experience, yet her conclusions show that she has reached a 
point where she understands the importance of continuity and of sustaining 
some relationships. She accepts that some relationships should be preserved, 
however imperfect they are, because they form part of the history of a 
person’s life:

She was angry at Clifford and Jocelyn. She felt that they had made a 
fool of her, cheated her, shown her a glaring lack, that otherwise she 
would not have been aware of. She resolved never to see them again 
and to write them a letter in which she would comment on their 
selfishness, obtuseness, and moral degeneracy. By the time she had 
the letter written to her own satisfaction, in her head, she was back in 
the country again and had calmed down. She decided not to write it. 
Sometime later she decided to go on being friends with Clifford and 
Jocelyn, because she needed such friends occasionally, at that stage 
of her life (Munro, 1991, 136).
Full appreciation of the place that Rose arrives at by the end of this story, and the awareness she has gained, is achieved by seeing her relationships with Clifford and Jocelyn over the full span of the years they have shared thus far, through their years as young parents, into middle age. Rose achieves autonomy in the actions she takes and the decisions she makes through encounters with these two people, at times regular and enmeshed, and at others sporadic and distant, over many years. The longer story required to explore the impacts of these relationships on Rose may have been difficult to achieve outside of a short story cycle. The cycle accommodates the longer story, and highlights the contribution that it makes to the themes being developed throughout.

**Conclusion**

The re-visioning possibilities conjured by the metaphor of the wave, representations of time and the mosaic narrative structure of the short story cycle, its emphasis on disparate events and its tolerance for narrative gaps and silences, and the incidental feature of the longer story within the cycle are all characteristics of the form that make it suitable for articulating women’s relational lives. Many writers have found this to be so, attested by a strong tradition of cycles by and about women as daughters, sisters, lovers, wives and mothers, as aged women, poor women, middle-class, of different ethnic and cultural background, and sexual orientation. This chapter has shown some examples of characters who reflect this diversity, including African American women, older women and white, middle class women.
Explored too, are the ways that these features of the short story cycle make the form suitable for illustrating the impacts of a subject’s intersectional identities, and the importance of relationships in shaping a subject’s autonomous capacities. The remainder of this thesis applies the concepts examined thus far to a close reading of one contemporary Australian short story cycle.
To this point, the discussion of the short story cycle has drawn primarily on texts by North American writers because it is within this tradition that the form has received greatest critical attention, and from which a great many creative works have emerged. A key interest of this thesis, however, is to increase awareness of the form in Australia, which does have its own creative tradition, if one not yet fully realised. ‘Five seeds’ in the first part of the thesis and these final chapters of the dissertation bookend this discussion with an original short story cycle set in Australian suburbia, and a critical study of a published contemporary cycle, *Purple threads*, by Australian writer Jeanine Leane respectively. Set more than forty years apart, in different social and geographical settings, each portraying three generations of women and girls from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the two creative works are brought together to demonstrate the diversity of experiences represented by the form.

Each of these cycles represents the notion that women develop a sense of self that is not only embedded in the communities they belong to, but is also indebted to them. As Barclay puts it: ‘immersion in networks of relationships forms their desires, aspirations, indeed their very identities’ (2000, 52). Further, Barclay claims that autonomy is not, therefore, achieved
by ‘mysteriously [escaping] the forces of socialization,’ but by ‘reflectively [engaging] with them to participate in shaping a life for [oneself]’ (2000, 55). The suitability of these claims that women come to a greater sense of themselves through relationships over the course of their lives is born out in the fictive cycles: ‘Five seeds’ and those discussed thus far. And this becomes apparent in a different way in *Purple threads* because the journey of the central character depicted in the stories represents the author’s own life experiences, thereby supporting claims that women’s writing based on their own lives has repeatedly been shown to draw on notions of relationality and collective identity (Smith and Watson in Wheeler, 2013, 66). Further, the process of life-writing can be one way of engaging reflectively with the forces that shape an individual and thereby actively striving towards relational autonomy.

*Purple threads* shares the focus and purpose of much writing by Indigenous peoples around the world, which explores the impacts of colonisation and its aftermath, functions that Justin Edwards describes as, ‘scrutinizing power relations and resisting imperialist prerogatives … [offering] a “symbolic overhaul” to reshape meanings in light of dominant hegemonies and powerful ideologies’ (2008, 11). This investigation therefore, brings together my interest in how women’s experiences are represented in the short story cycle form and Nagel’s findings that the form is popular with writers exploring complex issues of ethnicity and cultural identity. Launching from Nagel’s work, this study of *Purple threads* seeks to understand the significance of the short story cycle form and how it is
working in the context of postcolonial women’s writing. The discussion is carried over two chapters, one that situates the text within the tradition of Aboriginal women’s life-writing, and another that draws on the features of the short story cycle to show how the cycle represents relational identity within the small community of three generations of Aboriginal women.27

A deeper understanding of Purple threads is gained by considering the text within broader discussions about Aboriginal women’s life-writing. This chapter explores how Purple threads reflects relatively new developments in this field from auto/biographical to more overtly fictive forms. This chapter also argues that Purple threads can be read as a community narrative because it transcends the story of an individual girl, and becomes one that represents the experiences of a community as a whole. The experiences of individuals in any social group collectively form a broader picture, enabling patterns to emerge and deeper insights into the groups’ experience in society to be gained. The structure comprising interrelated stories in the short story cycle enhances this reading of Purple threads.

Harkening back to Ingram’s early description of the way that cycles work, the reader’s successive experience of engaging with the whole work modifies the experience of the component parts (1971, 19). And, as Nagel claims, the suitability of the form to explore issues of identity formation—precisely because of this unique structural characteristic—is evidenced by

27 This discussion could draw heavily on postcolonial theories; however, the thesis’s particular focus on creative writing and the short story cycle does not allow for such an orientation. See Brewster (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2006), Westphalen (2012) and Wheeler (2013) for detailed discussions about Australian Aboriginal literature from postcolonial perspectives.
the range of authors from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds adopting it. Chan’s reflections on using the short story cycle to write his thesis about Chineseness support this claim. He found that the cycle enabled him to expand the lives of the characters beyond the single story, showing individuals to be more complex through being embedded in social networks of family and community (2005, iv). In a similar fashion, comments made by *Purple threads* author, Leane, woven through these discussions, are valuable additions that illuminate this study with insights into her creative practice.

*Purple threads*—auto/biography, creative non-fiction or fiction?28

Postmodern theorists have questioned humanist assumptions of the auto/biography as a fixed, coherent record of an essential “truth” which

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28 Several overlapping terms are used in this chapter. They include auto/biography, life-writing, history and community narrative, according to the focus of the scholars to whose work I refer. For the purposes of my approach to *Purple threads*, I use the term life-writing to refer to this range of narratives, whether auto/biography, fiction, or creative non-fiction, which from the author’s point of view, record their actual experiences or those of other family members. Readers who seek out research drawn on in this thesis may come across the term “narrative of community” as used by Roxanne Harde and contributors to her edited book. Harde uses the term to refer to connected story collections that ‘negotiate the tensions between individual identity and community’ and that privilege ‘community over self, and a concern with process rather than a linear narrative’s conflict or progress’ (2007, 2). While this idea is applied to cycles written into the twentieth century, Harde draws on Zagarell’s theories as a starting point. To Zagarell, “narrative of community” is a literary tradition that emerged in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, dominated by white, middle-class women writers who shared a commitment to ‘rendering the life of a community to readers who lived in a world the authors thought fragmented, rationalized, and individualistic’ (2007, 454). While Harde’s and Zagarell’s ideas are consistent with claims made in this thesis, I am reluctant to forge a definitive link between Zagarell’s study of the North American tradition of that period and community narrative as I understand it in relation to Australian Aboriginal women’s life-writing, where the individual’s story reflects the broader experiences of a community.
view ‘autobiographical personhood as monadic and autonomous’ (Moore-Gilbert, 2009, 17). As scholar Betty Bergland asks:

Do we read at the centre of the autobiography a self, an essential individual, imagined to be coherent and unified, the originator of her own meaning, or do we read a postmodern subject—a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses? (1994, 134)

Eakin similarly objects to assumptions implied by the “auto” in autobiography:

The subject of autobiography to which the pronoun “I” refers is neither singular nor first, and we do well to demystify its claims … autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: I write my story; I say who I am; I create my self (1999, 43).

This section examines the ways in which overtly literary aspects of Purple threads disrupt the assumption that auto/biographies represent objective truthful accounts of a singular subject, and instead suggest that they are, rather, active and often shared representations of relational experiences that shape individual and community identities.

As with other short story cycles, each of the ten stories in Purple threads can stand alone and be read independently, yet each is linked in several ways so that they create richer meanings when read together. Therefore, in spite of a strong chronological narrative in the way these stories are organised, they could be pleasurably read out of sequence. The linking devices include the narrative point of view of the main protagonist, a child called Sunny; the common setting of Gundagai and its environs in the late

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29 For instance, in 1907 Georg Misch ‘proposed that the objective of the autobiographer is to “stand as an I, or, more exactly, as an ‘I’-saying person, over against, other persons and living beings.”’ (Moore-Gilbert, 2009, 17).

30 For a more comprehensive discussion of feminist thinking on autobiography see Stanley (1992), Summerfield, Lury and Cosselett (2000), and Smith and Watson (2010).
1960s and 1970s; a small ensemble of other characters; and themes about identity and belonging. An eleventh text piece, an epilogue aptly entitled ‘Country turns’, told from an adult Sunny’s perspective, reminisces on the years covered by the stories and ponders on key themes about family and how a person’s earliest experiences help to shape her life.

In Purple threads, Sunny and her younger sister, Star, are cared for by their Aboriginal relatives, Nan and Aunties Boo and Bubby, in a ramshackle house with various ‘lean-to verandas’ (Leane, 2011, 98) where the roof ‘creaked and sagged’ (95), on a patch of land that was once part of a larger farm owned by their late white grandfather, William. Other aunts and uncles have all left home and some have established families of their own. Boo and Bubby are the unmarried daughters who cared for their father, and now do the same for their mother. Sunny and Star’s mother Pearl, the youngest of Nan and William’s children, is rarely present in her children’s lives, or actively involved in their care. The stories in Purple threads are placed side by side in a loosely chronological order, following Sunny from about age five to early adolescence. They cover a range of experiences, including her resistance to Sunday school and her confusion about the role of religion in the family; her distant relationship with her mother; meeting her father and white relatives for the first time; and starting school. There are also many other incidents, articulated in the narrative present or told as stories from the past, involving the family’s interactions with the white farming community that surrounds but largely excludes them.
In many respects *Purple threads* continues a tradition of auto/biographical narratives written by Aboriginal women, which began to appear in the 1980s, and gained momentum in the 1990s. This canon includes Sally Morgan’s *My place* (1987), Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t take your love to town* (Langford, 1988), Alice Nannup’s *When the pelican laughed* (1992), co-authored with Lauren Marsh and Stephen Kinnane, and Rosalie Fraser’s *Shadow child* (1998). Like these texts, *Purple threads* draws on the personal experiences of the author, and makes a significant contribution to this rich field of Australian literature. However, there are distinctive points of difference in Leane’s narrative. As a creative writer I am particularly interested in the mimetic fictive techniques that *Purple threads* deploys as a cycle of stories. The stories are closely based on Leane’s experiences growing up and, importantly to her, the characters and events described are faithful representations of those actual people and experiences. My view of the book does not seek to challenge this position, and accepts the view that life-writing by Aboriginal women represents lived experiences that have been ignored, silenced or denied in mainstream culture. That these histories reflect the “truth” is often fiercely defended. For instance, Langford Ginibi declared:

> I’m not interested in fiction. Don’t need to be, because I’m too busy writing the truth about my people, in the hope that this country will open its eyes and say, ‘Hey, here’s this whole wonderful human resource that we’ve only used for our own gain, and never accepted into our society’ (Little, 1994, np).\(^{32}\)

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31 Originally published under the author’s name, Ruby Langford. In 1990, Langford’s aunt, Eileen Morgan, a tribal elder of Box Ridge Mission, gave Langford her tribal name ‘Ginibi’ (black swan). Langford has been known by this full name since (Ginibi, author record, AustLit, 2002–).

32 Debates about the ‘truth’ of fiction are various and ongoing. For example, the narrator in Virginia Woolf’s *A room of one’s own* (1929/1989) self-consciously disrupts the boundaries between truth and fiction when she says: ‘Fiction here is likely to contain more
Yet, Brewster, who has written extensively on Aboriginal women’s writing, claims that it is inappropriate to label earlier life-writing by Aboriginal women as unproblematically autobiographical, because in many cases the boundaries between the author’s own life story and that of other family members is often blurred. Brewster does, however, suggest that ‘these texts examine the author’s own life within the context of other family members … [and they] are in fact both autobiographical and biographical’ (1996a, 9). Further, as previously argued, these texts do important archival work, creating imaginative spaces within a dominant white culture to record alternative versions of a history that has privileged white assumptions and priorities, and to invoke a sense of continuity with traditional Aboriginal modes of recording and sharing history. As Brewster claims,

in the transition from orality to literature, story becomes history, at least in the sense that Aboriginal historians construct it; namely, a discourse that establishes continuities between past and present (1995, 61).

While grounded in the literary heritage of Aboriginal women’s life-writing, *Purple threads* reflects a growing field that, in contrast with Langford

truth than fact’ (1989, 4). See also Michael Riffaterre’s defence of the truth of fiction: ‘a systematic scrutiny of the textual mechanisms and the verbal structures that represent or imply the truth of a fictitious tale’ (1990, xii). By extension, note the criticism following publication of author Kate Grenville’s novel, *The secret river*. For instance, Inga Clendinnen’s essay, ‘The history question: who owns the past?’ (2006) and Tom Griffiths, ‘History and the creative imagination’ (2009), about the blurring of the line between (historical) truth and fiction.

Brewster remarks that generic boundaries are further disrupted because these texts often contain features of other genres such as memoir, the testimonial and the polemic, and many are essentially oral and collaborative in nature (written with editorial assistance) (1996a, 9).

Brewster’s remarks resonate with the discussion on narrative closure in Chapter Three, where the claim was made that closure in the short story cycle is often provisional. The connections between the stories, and the silences maintained in the narrative spaces create a stronger sense of open-endedness and continuity than novels often achieve.
Ginibi’s autobiographical texts, for instance, draws more readily on literary storytelling techniques, including poetic language, imagery, metaphor, characterisation and dialogue. Once Leane decided to focus on significant events through the linked, independent stories of the short story cycle rather than a strictly singular and chronological narrative, she found that the form dictated, at least to some extent, the style. She says that she was conscious of the literary devices that make stories work and that people expect … the need for each story to be containable in its own right, e.g. each story needing a climax while not necessarily a resolution, at least some sense of finish.\(^{35}\)

To Leane, however, these “literary devices” do not diminish the truthfulness of the stories. For instance, when I suggested to her that the extensive dialogue in the stories might be one example of the fictionalising of the past, she responded by saying that the dialogue, to me, is the least fictional element of the book. The wording was very real … I really worked and thought hard about keeping the dialogue, this voice, this life blood of oral history.\(^{36}\)

These features blur the boundaries that western literary traditions have traditionally maintained or at least tried to maintain, between fact and fiction, auto/biography and memoir. Leane questioned the reductive limits these generic categories might impose on texts, dismissing those categories as setting up dichotomies that may not be universally applicable to all literatures.\(^{37}\)

\(^{35}\) Jeanine Leane, interviewed by Helena Kadmos, August 2013.

\(^{36}\) Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.

\(^{37}\) Traditional auto/biographical texts that record significant aspects of the collective Indigenous story, including the complex basis of cultural identity, continue to be written by women. Notable amongst them is Anita Heiss’s *Am I black enough for you?* (2012), which won the Victorian Premier’s Award for Indigenous Writing, and responded directly to
Scholar Tess Cosslett, who is interested in narratives that disrupt the generic boundaries in this way, sees them as part of a ‘feminist-inspired move by which contemporary women’s autobiographies construct a matrilineage for their protagonists’ (2000, 142). In other words, the authors of such texts, according to Cosslett, attempt to reclaim or recover the mother’s subjectivity by writing the mother’s stories in conjunction with their own (2000, 141). In some instances, the mother’s story is lost or hidden (where older relatives are dead, illiterate, or are not writers, for instance), and here, Cosslett says, ‘fictionality necessarily and overtly enters’ (2000, 142). She claims there would be no need for these elements of fiction in auto/biography if the author were merely wishing to present what she remembers about her female relatives, but very often the author wishes to restore subjectivity to the mother and other female relatives, as well as to show their influence on the protagonist. Cosslett describes this, in terms equally suited to the short story cycle, as a ‘complex move—the telling of several interconnected life-stories at once, emphasising both the similarities and the differences, the interrelationships and the separateness, of their subjects’ (2000, 142; italics added). Bart Moore-Gilbert frames a similar observation in terms of relational autonomy:

For many feminist critics, this conception of the autonomy of autobiographical identity is as clearly gendered as the emphasis on unified and centred Selfhood which traditionally accompanies it in Auto/biography Studies. By contrast, they have almost unanimously

claims made by journalist Andrew Bolt that light-skinned people who identified as Aboriginal did so for personal gain.
argued that subjectivity in women’s life-writing is primarily relational rather than monadic (2009, 17-18).  

Leane’s reflections on the creative elements of Purple threads resonate with these claims. She remarked that, ‘the subjectivity of the women was most important for me, and that it came through their own words.’ She wanted to reveal her older female relatives to a world that she believes didn’t see them, through ‘episodes in and outside of the home that brought home the character, strength and resilience of the women, the subjectivity that wasn’t necessarily obvious to the outside world.’

Thus personal and artistic judgements informed Leane’s choice of the short story cycle as the most appropriate form through which to capture snapshots of her unique upbringing in rural Australia. That Purple threads draws more explicitly than some of its predecessors on fictional storytelling conventions does not lessen its role in the important political and archival work that Aboriginal women’s life-writing has been doing for several decades. The

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38 Moore-Gilbert does caution, nevertheless, against the ‘dangers of reification which attend discussions of the issue of (de)centred subjectivity’ (2009, 18). He argues that in the post-colonial context, ‘women’s life-writing does not embrace relationality as a matter of course’ (2009, 18). This thesis does not seek to essentialise Aboriginal women’s life-writing, but it does draw on research by scholars quoted here that claim that relationality is a feature of much of the writing in this field.

39 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.

40 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.

41 Purple threads’ fresh approach to recording women’s experiences does open up new lines of investigation into the development of this literary tradition. For instance, in one collection of Indigenous writing, the editors speculate that the rare appearance of fiction amongst the texts (at that time) may be due to ‘a lack of familiarity with or assimilation to this particular genre [amongst older Indigenous writers] and the generational specificity of the imperatives driving the production of life stories (such as their value as archival and pedagogical documents)’ (Brewster, O’Neill and van den Berg, 2000, 10). Leane concurred with these views, claiming that her education and extensive reading of world literature has informed her understanding of literary narrative (Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013). The suggestion that educational accomplishment and familiarity with western literature influenced a writer’s output was also made nearly twenty years ago by Ruby
next section further disrupts the notion of auto/biography as the objective narrative of a singular, autonomous subject, an “I”-saying person’ (Moore-Gilbert, 2009, 17), claiming the concept of Aboriginal women’s life-writing as primarily relational. Reflecting the view that ‘it is only in virtue of the fact that we are exposed to social influence in multifarious ways that we are ever capable of being autonomous at all…’ (Barclay, 2000, 58), this section argues that this cycle of stories about an individual girl growing up is in fact a community narrative.

**Purple threads as a community narrative**

This thesis argues that the short story cycle constructs meaning in a unique way through its structure of independent yet interrelated stories. Individual stories explore a particular theme or idea, but when the cycle is read as a whole, richer, deeper meanings often take shape. Thus, *Purple threads* explores a range of themes through the successive stories, which, when brought together, develop more complexity, such as the notion of relational identity, while resisting the development of a single overarching plot line. It does this by homing in on significant events in the young protagonist’s life that show the influence of family and others on her developing sense of self. Through the older women’s sharing of stories from their own lives, a more diverse range of experiences are brought into relief. *Purple threads* can therefore be viewed as a story about a principal character, as well as a text

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Langford Ginibi when she said, in response to a question that compared her work to Sally Morgan’s highly successful *My place* (also purportedly auto/biographical): ‘Oh, we’re two different people, Sal and I. Put it this way. Sal’s an academic, she’s been to university, got a degree, she’s an artist to boot. And me I only went to second form, class 2F actually and that’s a long way from A, B and C’ (Little, 1994, np).
that uses individual stories to explore, more broadly, the experiences of many Aboriginal people in Australia. It achieves this in three ways. At one level there is the predominant thread that traces the story of a young girl growing up in rural Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. But as is typical of much Aboriginal women’s life-writing, the stories also explore the importance of family and the interconnectedness of family members. At yet another level the text reflects the experiences of many Aboriginal people living in rural NSW under the impacts of colonisation. This section examines these three layers of this short story cycle: individual, family, and community, and concludes that Purple threads, while offering alternative representations of the lives of women and girls, can be read as a community narrative, thus highlighting the claim that autonomy is achieved through an individual subject’s relationships with family and wider communities, and is ‘attributable to our developing and remaining embedded within a network of social relationships’ (Barclay, 2000, 57).\footnote{Similar effects can be achieved in dramatic instances of the short story cycle. During the writing of this chapter two seasons of the Australian drama Redfern now aired on ABC television—the first drama series to be written, produced and directed by Indigenous Australians (2012. Sydney: Blackfella Films). Each season comprises separate stories involving different characters, exploring how their lives are changed by a seemingly insignificant moment—the decision to go back into the house to answer a phone call, to get into the back-seat of a car. This approach to television is not new. The series’ British story developer and scriptwriting mentor, Jimmy McGovern, used the same technique in his acclaimed series, The street (2006. Manchester: Granada Television). In Redfern now, stand-alone stories that spotlight moments in different characters’ lives—connected by place (inner-city Sydney), race (Aboriginality) and theme (how a person’s responses to unexpected events speak to their character, and shape their relationships with others)—seem to allow for a greater diversity of experiences to be represented in a limited time than would have been possible in a sustained narrative following a few central characters. This approach underscores the view that individual experiences do not occur in a vacuum but are interrelated with the shared experience of the community.}
While the book is not a unified sustained narrative, the chronological framework of the stories tracing Sunny’s development through her formative years, exploring her growing self-knowledge, how she perceives herself and how she is perceived by others, echoes in some ways a feminine *bildungsroman*. Although the *bildungsroman* is usually associated with the novel, it has been used as a descriptor for a short story cycle before. Nagel makes this claim about *Annie John*, by Jamaica Kincaid (1985), which consists of eight stories spanning seven years in the life of the eponymous character (also a young Indigenous girl) as she moves through her childhood towards her departure from her Antiguan home (2001, 57). Annalisa Pes makes the same claim about the Samoan short story cycle, *Where we once belonged* (1996) by Sia Figiel, about thirteen year-old Alofa (Pes, 2010, 207). Importantly, remarks made by Leane elsewhere, that the Aboriginal *bildungsroman* can be seen as ‘social and emotional growth towards the formation of an identity that is collective rather than individual,’ supports the reading of this short story cycle as narrativising the concept of relational autonomy (2013, 113).

*Purple threads* contains many stories that explore the demands confronting Sunny as she grows up and as she interacts with various people beyond her family unit. They show her in different situations, at different stages of her life, struggling to meet the expectations placed on her as a niece, grandchild, daughter, sister, neighbour and friend. Added to these pressures is her growing, confusing and sometimes painful awareness of what it means to be
Aboriginal as she understands it, according to the significance some others appear to assign to that identity. Some of these experiences will be explored in the next chapter, particularly where I discuss the development of Sunny’s intersectional and relational identity through the short story cycle form. For now, I emphasise a few examples: Sunny’s striving to be accepted at school, her sense of alienation from the white community, and her own white relatives’ ambivalent reactions to her. These experiences reveal how her individual identity is dependent for meaning on relationships with others. Simultaneously, these stories illuminate the experiences of the broader family by crossing paths with the storytelling by Sunny’s Nan and Aunties as they reminisce about significant experiences from their respective pasts, and how those experiences continue to have an impact on the present.

**Family**

Sunny’s individual story works to elicit the reader’s interest and empathy in the young girl’s dilemmas, but this book is very much about the family, headed by women who are central in Sunny’s life—her Nan and Aunties—richly drawn characters who offer insights into the diversity of Aboriginal women’s experiences in ways that many western readers may find refreshing. For instance Nan, as a young woman, was taken out of domestic service by the white, protestant settler who married her. She was raised a Christian and ‘always said it was best to keep up the act in public’ (1). But her real spiritual solace is found in her garden, an extensive, flourishing oasis of native and exotic plants, which she nurtured on Sunday mornings, ‘right under [William’s] nose while he was out worshipping other idols’
Aunties Boo and Bubby utilise remarkable ingenuity to negotiate with other white farmers over stock. Aunty Boo is a swearing, staunch realist who identifies with the women’s movement, even echoing the radical second-wave feminists of her time when she remarks, “All this world needs, girl, is women an’ dogs an’ kids” (2). Younger sister, Aunty Boo, the dreamer, buries herself in romantic novels, re-reading her favourite, Wuthering heights, well into her old age. Sunny provides a clear description of how different the two women are, and what each brings to her life, in the following:

‘Ya know, girl,’ Aunty Bubby once said, ‘quickest way to a man’s heart is with good food an’ a clean house.’

Later on, when we were up the hill, Aunty Boo said, ‘Quicker way to a man’s heart is straight through his chest with a bloody big spear!’ (4)

The stories in Purple threads thus create spaces where the reader can appreciate the vitality yet complexity of these women’s ordinary lives. Through a range of experiences recounted to Sunny by the women, these stories function to give voice to the women’s knowledge about the land, about surviving in a white patriarchal society as Aboriginal women, and about using their inner strength to cope with the difficulties that will inevitably arise in such circumstances. In this respect, Purple threads departs from the classic bildungsroman in that it is as much a book about the older women who feature in the stories and the family relationships that help to shape Sunny’s life, as it is about Sunny herself. This purpose seems

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43 Prominent feminist author and critic Adrienne Rich, in her book, Of woman born, said, of her holiday with her three sons, ‘we lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children’ (1977, 194).
to be well served through the features of the short story cycle, due to its narrative capacity to roam across the landscape of family and community life, homing in on particularly significant events and experiences.

Leane affirmed this view when I asked about her decision to write the story as linked, independent pieces. She agreed that the book is ultimately homage to her Aunties, but reported that she had difficulty settling on the most appropriate way to do justice to the lives of these women who were so important to her. She said that, after many attempts to record their lives as a longer narrative, she came to realise that what was really important to her was the impact their love and guidance had on her:

I tried on a number of occasions, and once I wrote a huge manuscript about the women in my life … I think that after I wrote that quite grandiose piece about my Aunties … that I felt that it wasn’t all necessary, and that there were particularly important things, incidents, episodes, that I should focus on. 44

These comments reinforce the idea that ‘the fact that any of us has the capacity for autonomous agency is a debt that we owe to others (Barclay, 2000, 57).’ The structure of the short story cycle, therefore, provided Leane with a form through which she could capture significant personal experiences in a way that acknowledged the importance of family in her developing sense of self.

Broadly understood as multi-generational and inclusive of extended family and sometimes close friends, family is a strong feature in much writing by Aboriginal women. Brewster claims that the home (and, by extension,

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44 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, December 2011.
family) is often portrayed as a woman-centred place, a site of women’s knowledges and practices. It becomes, she says, ‘a site of resistance to a dominant culture which, both indirectly and directly, applies pressure to minority cultures in its midst to conform and assimilate to the dominant culture’s codes and conventions’ (1996a, 11).  

The family in *Purple threads*, dominated by strong women, is certainly conveyed as a site of resistance. The women are unstinting in their efforts to nurture each other and keep the family intact. The book is, therefore, both the story of a girl growing to adulthood, in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, and a short story cycle reflecting the experiences of a whole family. It is also part of the canon of writing that represents the shared and diverse experiences of the broader Indigenous community.

**Community**

Given each individual’s multiple subjectivities, the extent to which any individual can lay claims to shared experience with other members of a community is not always clear. Questions may arise as to which community one can lay claim to at any time, and to what extent the similarities and differences between members of that community constitute a shared understanding. It wasn’t until the 1960s that, forced by the impacts of dispossession, marginalisation and increased regulation of their lives, people from distinct Indigenous groups in Australia began to unite around shared  

45 Brewster does raise the point that the importance of family in Aboriginal women’s narratives can be seen to run against the views of some first-world feminists who, as discussed in Chapter Three, view the family as oppressive for women (1996a, 10).
interests and common goals. Brewster describes this notion of pan-Aboriginality as politically charged and contingent, and argues that ‘Aboriginal people’s narrativisation of the past is always relative to their position in the present … [which] is in a constant state of flux as the present changes’ (1996a, 4). Given the rich diversity of pre-colonial Indigenous cultures, and the often-violent ruptures to those communities caused by colonisation, and this ever-changing present, it is reasonable to expect that Indigenous people’s thinking about identity and shared experience is varied and sometimes conflicting. For instance, Moreton-Robinson says that Indigenous women’s ‘belonging is based on blood line to country [and their bodies are] tangible evidence of our sovereignty, and … evidence of our ontology … born of the interrelationship between ancestral beings, humans and country’ (2010, 6). Yet others find such claims problematic. Yin Paradies, who identifies racially as an Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian Australian, declares:

I do not speak an Aboriginal language, I do not have a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity, I have little contact with my extended family, and the majority of my friends are non-Indigenous (2006, 358).

Martin Nakata proposes a model for shared experience that acknowledges these differences of opinion when he says:

Regardless of their distance from what we understand as ‘the traditional context’, the Indigenous epistemological basis of knowledge construction and the ways of ‘doing’ knowledge are not

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46 Writing about the problems associated with notions of a shared, distinct and coherent pan-Indigenous identity, Paradies says that while this can be a positive experience for many, the constructions of such an identity can also involve elements of ‘boundary construction/policing’ which can in themselves be restricting and alienating for others (2006, 356). He draws on Anderson, Nakata and Russell to claim that ‘in order to challenge prevailing stereotypes, Indigenous people are often required to publicly confess our intimate subjectivities [and such confessions] serve to remind us of the situated and partial nature of knowledge’ (2006, 357).
completely unfamiliar. These are embedded, not in detailed knowledge of the land and place for all of us perhaps, not perhaps in environmental or ecological knowledge, but in ways of story-telling, of memory-making, in narrative, art and performance; in cultural and social practices, of relating to kin, of socialising children; in ways of thinking, of transmitting knowledge, even in creolised languages; and in that all encompassing popular, though loosely used term, ‘worldview’ (2007, 10).

This understanding of shared community experience is useful for my study of Purple threads. In this text, the characters and themes do not explicitly claim that knowledge expressed, or experiences shared, are exclusively Aboriginal, but the constructs of and emphasis on family, the place of children in the community, and the significant role of language and story-telling in a range of different situations, are implicitly informed by traditional epistemologies that have survived colonisation and, in some instances, blended with western influences. In this way, Purple threads, like other Aboriginal women’s personal life stories, reflects a broader narrative about Aboriginal people’s shared experiences and struggles as the effects of colonisation continue to have an impact on their communities.

As this chapter argues, the notion of a self-contained, self-made subject is incongruous with the lived realities of social beings. It is the unavoidable interdependence of relational subjects that reciprocally form personal and shared identities. This thinking is consistent with views that Aboriginal women’s narratives are histories of actual communities that collectively tell a much larger story, one that has been largely untold in mainstream culture. For instance, Langford Ginibi says, of her autobiography, ‘this is not only
my book, my story, it’s the story of every Aboriginal woman in this country today that’s got kids to raise. I’m only one’ (Little, 1994, np). And historian Jackie Huggins, who wrote a book about her mother, *Auntie Rita* (1994), has said that the importance of recording the stories of Aboriginal people, particularly elders, is that they collectively record an existence that is profoundly silent and invisible in the official records of white government bodies and institutions (1998, 2). Similarly, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasises the collective nature and benefit of personal stories from Indigenous people. She claims that the sharing of personal histories (in oral and written forms) is integral to Indigenous research because

> the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every Indigenous person has a place … the story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story (1999, 144–145; italics added).

These comments highlight the point that our individual selves are inextricably linked to others’, and that our personal journeys, our apparently independent struggles, are part of a much larger, collective human story.

The short story cycle, as *Purple threads* demonstrates, depicts this interrelationship between the individual and collective story in its very structure, and, as a result of its tendency to disrupt temporal linearity, is suitable for telling stories that illustrate the relational aspects of women’s lives. Moreton-Robinson’s views resonate with this claim. She says that Indigenous women’s life-writings do not necessarily fit the usual strict chronological narrative of autobiography [and are] fundamentally social and relational, not something ascribed separately within the individual. Indigenous women’s life-writings are based on the collective memories of inter-generational
relationships between predominantly Indigenous women, extended families and communities (2000, 1).

More recently this discussion continues in the academy in relation to the importance of generating and sharing the stories of Indigenous people in processes that move Australia beyond the impacts of colonisation. For instance, Paradies argues that, given the complex compositions of Indigenous identity, auto/biography can be utilised as a ‘rhetorical construction [which] along with contemporary scholarship on identity both in Australia and abroad [can] explore … fantasies of Indigeneity’ (2006, 357), and thereby deepen awareness of the wide diversity of Indigenous experiences, past and present. For Westphalen, and the authors included in her research study, as well as the writers and scholars quoted above, auto/biographical writings by Aboriginal people in Australia are most often stories about whole families and communities, and can be seen as histories that reflect something of the broader Indigenous experience in Australia. The views Leane expressed during our conversation are consistent with these ideas. When asked about the auto/biographical nature of Purple threads, she said that the terms autobiography and biography may be valid in western literary history, but that “life-writing” or “community narrative” more adequately describe the process by which a subject, like the central protagonist in her book, writes herself into something larger, where she is part of a greater thing.47 ‘I didn’t ever see it as my story’, she said, ‘and I still don’t’.48

47 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, December 2011.
48 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.
Conclusion

This chapter situates Purple threads within broader discussions about Aboriginal women’s life-writing. I have claimed that Purple threads draws more overtly on creative or fictional storytelling techniques than many of the personal narratives that preceded it, but that it shares the focus and purpose of these other texts to record the personal histories of family members and build a picture of the diversity of Indigenous experiences in Australia. I have argued that this text is at one level a story about a girl growing up and at another level a bigger story about a family and community. The character Sunny’s personal development, therefore, represents the larger narrative of the impacts of colonisation and racism on Aboriginal people, their communities and their cultures, a narrative realised in the lives of Nan and the Aunties and the small family they nurture and protect with strength and wisdom. This representation of family and community encourages a reading of the text as a relational community narrative. I suggest that the various formal and structural components of the short story cycle discussed in Chapter Three complement this orientation because its component parts lend themselves to representations of a range of characters and perspectives while at the same time develop common themes around the shared elements of those experiences.

In the final chapter I explore, in greater detail, how key themes about women’s relational identities are developed through the interdependence and interrelatedness of the stories in Purple threads.
Thematic development in the short story cycle: relational identity in *Purple threads*

As the discussion in the previous chapter has shown, *Purple threads* is a book about the relational lives of women and girls depicted through significant moments in the lives of the family. This thesis argues that the transformation and learning, the certainty and ambivalence in many women’s lives are revealed through ordinary experiences, particularly over time. Many aspects of women’s lives are touched upon in this cycle: the experiences of girls growing into women; of working women and single, unmarried women; of older women, especially their influence on younger members. Representations of caring and mothering in the stories raise questions about who can claim the identity of mother, and biological versus social mothering is also explored. There are also stories that bring to light the experiences of Aboriginal women living in a colonised world, and how these women reserve and reclaim some measures of power in their lives. Notably, these women and girls represent an ensemble of multifaceted characters in the stories. Other characters, where they are present, are less complex, less formed. This privileging of female characters, especially Aboriginal women, may be a deliberate strategy to redress the silencing and invisibility of Indigenous women and girls in mainstream representations of Australian social, cultural and political life.
For all these reasons, *Purple threads* supports claims made in this thesis that the short story cycle aptly represents conceptions of relational autonomy, which, in Mackenzie and Stoljar’s words, ‘analyze the implications of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency’ (2000, 4). More specifically, as a text grounded in Aboriginal women’s life-writings, *Purple threads* represents intersectional relational identity, which, as Diana Tietjens Meyers remarks, reflects the ways that ‘individuals internalize gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and ethnicity in sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, and xenophobic societies’ (2000, 153).

This chapter, therefore, carries the discussion of *Purple threads* forward through a close reading for the ways relationality is represented as a key feature of women’s lives, and in particular, the development of the young protagonist’s intersectional identity as an Aboriginal girl. While this theme can be successfully traced in other narrative forms, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the features of the short story cycle work in specific ways to explore how women learn who they are, and their place in the communities they belong to, through relationships of care and interdependence. Firstly, this chapter identifies three underlying themes—country, time and orality—that serve as discursive links between the independent stories, and unfold through the successive reading of the stories in the cycle, reinforcing the notion that subjects interrelate in geographical, temporal and social locations. Secondly, underpinning this discussion is the idea that the short story cycle aptly represents the interactive processes
whereby family knowledge shared and withheld in families contributes to a sense of self. Thirdly, features of the short story cycle identified in this thesis—the independence and interrelatedness of the stories, the focus on isolated events, the resistance to narrative closure, and the longer story within this cycle—are shown to be particularly suitable for the imaginative exploration of relational identity.

**Thematic links in Purple threads: country, time, orality**

The independent stories that comprise short story cycles are unified in one or more of several ways that reinforce the interrelationships of the subjects whose lives are explored in the form. In *Purple threads*, the garland of the purple wisteria is a motif weaving its way through the stories and symbolising the older women’s influence on every aspect of Sunny’s life.\(^{49}\)

Weaving through these stories too, are elements of specific physical, temporal and cultural locations that contribute equally to a knowable sense of self. Country, incorporating both the physical and emotional landscapes in which the stories are set, represents one of these thematic links. In fact, *Purple threads* teems with references to it, images of it, and stories about it. While I acknowledge that the term country cannot mean the same thing to everyone, least of all to all Indigenous people, *Purple threads* is grounded in claims to country that resemble ideas expressed by scholars Moreton-

\(^{49}\)The garland is a rope of intertwined threads formed by weaving separate strands together. In this text, the garland is purple, a colour traditionally associated with women’s emancipation. Pes also conjures the relational, cyclical nature of the short story cycle by drawing on the imagery of the garland. She claims that the form ‘cannot be enclosed in a canonic western genre, [but] draws on South Pacific modes of oral story-telling called *su’ifefiloi*, that denote in Samoa the making of a *ula* (or garland) with many different types of flowers, or the weaving or threading of many different songs to make out a long long one (2010, 205).
Robinson and Maggie Walter, who say that ‘Indigenous peoples have developed their knowledge systems over millennia living on and alongside the land … [and] are therefore predicated on societal relations with country’ (2010, 3). Even more than a metaphorical or symbolic relationship between identity and country, the book suggests an interpenetration, a literal meshing of bodies and land, and thus expresses understandings about the relationship between people and the land that are ontologically quite different to commonly-held western ideas.\footnote{Brewster remarks that in his life-narrative, The man from the sunrise side, Ambrose Chalarimeri’s ‘Indigenous ontology of land reverses several western binaries, perhaps the most widely recognized instance of which is the notion that the land belongs to the people; in his formulation the land is primary and the people “belong” to it’ (2006, 99).} For instance, the narrator ‘was born into the purpleness of October’ (Leane, 2011, 51). A body is buried in the flooding river bank; the earth, we are told, should be so healthy it could be eaten. And an Aunty would rather “‘lay down an’ die under a tree on the hill … An’ bury meself too so the crows won’t get me”’ (150) than suffer old age in the way her frail white neighbour does, neglected by family.\footnote{A full discussion of country in Purple threads can be found in Kadmos, 2014b.}

Chapter Three explored how the short story cycle is suited to representing notions of time that may not be straightforward or linear, but rather multilayered and provisional. In Purple threads, time unfolds in journeys involving patterns of leaving and returning through stories emphasising that turning and returning are materially significant acts connected to land and home. For instance, Nan tells how her white husband, William, tried to force her to relinquish her cultural traditions with threats such as: ‘there’ll be no talk of the past or heathen talk or superstitious mumbo-jumbo or I’ll...
send you back to where you came from’ (43–44; italics in original). He meant the place where she was working as a domestic servant when he met her, but that place was far away from her home country. Ironically, Nan says:

‘Tell ya one thing, though! … I was born round here, on this country, bit further back from the river ’tween two creeks, place called Murrumburrah … One thing I hafta say ’bout William is he brought me home’ (44).52

Forever present throughout the stories, either directly engaged in the matter at hand, or in the background, commenting on the present or recalling the past, are the older women. The experiences they share, the knowledge they have gained from having lived through much of what their nieces experience now, function as a palimpsest to the events in Sunny’s life. There is a sense of history repeating itself; however, although Sunny lives out much of what her Nan and Aunties themselves did, the place she ends up is not where they found themselves at her age, or now. Her life in part echoes their experiences, but it does not replicate them.

Orality—by which I mean speaking, directly and through the messages conveyed—is a third thematic link between the stories in Purple threads. The older women’s direct speech, in their own unique style, peppers the stories, and their talk, as they teach the girls about the world, share stories about the past and reflect on the present, is unguarded and immediate. For instance, in reference to the Country Women’s Association, we are told that

52 Leane explained that “Murrumburrah” refers to the ground that lies between two creeks that were previously one, and have forked in two. This often fertile land is thus “encircled” by the winding, twin creeks (Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013).
Nan says that ‘she’d never seen a “pack o’ more sour-faced women” in all her life. “Bloody gossipin’ mob, always pokin’ ’round afta church askin’ questions ’bout things that aren’t none of their business’” (14).

Author Kim Scott, pointing out that his own novel, *That deadman dance* (2010), opens with a Nyoongar word, “Kaya”, remarked that this action establishes, right at the start, that the story originates in the experiences—through the eyes, the ears and the lips—of Aboriginal people, embodying ‘the very business of language retrieval [which is] a narrative of Aboriginal resilience, survival, potentially self-determination, sovereignty.’

Similarly, *Purple threads* opens with dialogue, and a mix of English and Aboriginal words: ““Bloody gammon ya know, girl!”” (1). And the many conversations which follow, often taking place in front of the fire or during long walks in the countryside, also echo traditional storytelling practices and usually occur within the tight circle of the three elder women, whom the two

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53 Of the language mix of Samoan and English in *Where we once belonged*, Pes says it gives the book a ‘truthful and genuine’ quality, that is ‘very far from the stereotyped exoticism of western writers and artists’ (2010, 206). She reports that Figiel’s reasoning behind the use of both Samoan and English words is that ‘they are intertwined in the cultural reality of Samoa, they co-exist and hybridize’ and that this ‘“contamination” [of language] … should be seen as a wealth’ (2010, 206). Pes adds that ‘there is also a problem related to the difficulty of giving a written shape to a culture that is essentially oral, and of adapting oral storytelling to a western fictional medium, a goal that perhaps can be achieved only by blending both narrative modes and languages’ (2010, 207). As Pes claims, the short story cycle, as a narrative *ula* (or garland), structurally and thematically represents this intertwining and blending.

54 *That deadman dance* won the Miles Franklin Award in 2011. These comments are drawn from the Miles Franklin Oration that Scott delivered at Curtin University in May 2012, during which he was asked to reflect on the following quote from Franklin: “Without an indigenous literature, people can remain alien in their own soil” (available, at the time of writing, in video format at http://www.milesfranklin.com.au/). Scott’s interest in Indigenous literatures also finds expression in his work to regenerate the Nyoongar language through The Wirloman Noongar Language and Stories Project, details of which can be found at http://wirlomin.com.au/.
little girls watch and listen to. The reader, through Sunny’s narration, also
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ches and listens from outside this fireside talk. Brewster claims that oral
storytelling features prominently in Aboriginal women’s narratives, and that
it is often ‘didactic (drawing a moral from a particular story or incident)’
and highly colloquial, ‘suggestive of everyday conversation’ (1996a, 52).
And further, that the purpose of these stories is twofold: educative measures
for younger family members who have not lived through the times the
grandmothers did; and a means of breaking the silences and blindness of
white ignorance about Aboriginal experiences of colonisation (1996a 43).
Teaching, in all forms, is a process of passing on, often from one generation
to the next, and may be better understood as an iterative oral process,
because there is always some mutual exchange and some repetition as
lessons are reiterated.

It is clear, therefore, that language functions at many levels and it is
intimately tied to relational notions of belonging between people, and
between people and place. It connects a person to home and family; it can
gain them access to new places and different forms of power; and it brings
them home again too. We see that Sunny learns these lessons, and that,
while her life takes her away from her home and the aunties, language helps
orient her to the places and people she is with at a given moment. In the
epilogue she says:

55 Westphalen also argues that Indigenous women’s stories have a core educative purpose.
She claims that, ‘in the same way that Dreaming Stories are used to educate others,
particularly the young and uninformed, to identify people with (and in) their past and to
connect people to each other and to the land, life-stories operate to teach, identify and
connect’ (2012, 13).
I was a big woman by then, and the Aunties said they’d finished growing me up. They were delighted that I’d made it through school and been offered a place in university.

‘Good on ya, babe,’ Aunty Boo gushed as she slapped me on the back. ‘You’ll be able to talk to the gov’ment an’ lotsa ’portant people. But donchya forget ya home talk when ya learnin’ to be flash’ (152).

Country. Time. Orality—three thematic links that tie the individual stories together, and help to create a deeper sense of the connections between a character’s developing sense of self and the material, temporal and social places she inhabits. How knowledge, about oneself and others, forms over time, contributes to yet another underlying theme central to understanding the processes involved in constructing relational identity.

**Family knowledge: shared and withheld**

Meyers claims that

self-ignorance is one of the principal enemies of autonomy, and self-knowledge requires being honest with oneself about who one is—owning up to and owning one’s identity. [Further, that] … understanding the impact of group memberships on one’s identity is necessary not only for personal autonomy but also for moral and political autonomy (2000, 158–9).

The stories in *Purple threads* build an imaginative picture of how Sunny develops self-knowledge about herself and her family. Her membership of an Aboriginal community culminates in an epilogue that suggests that some measure of personal, moral and political autonomy is achieved through self-acceptance. Throughout the stories, both the presence and absence of information—or the details shared with Sunny (and, by extension, the reader), and those left unresolved—contribute to Sunny’s self-knowledge,
and to the reader also building a knowable sense of the women’s lives.\textsuperscript{56} However, knowledge passed within and between generations in families is not neutral or definitive, but relational and co-created through exchanges that are often ambiguous, sporadic and inconsistent. The stories in this short story cycle represent the interactive and inconsistent processes of making sense of experience, as Sunny adapts and reconstructs knowledge to suit her own subjective needs and understandings. Further, as argued in Chapter Three, the short story cycle suitably accommodates silences, and these inevitably linger in the telling, sharing and receiving of stories about family members. As Meyers claims, ‘autonomy unfolds in situ, and autonomous individuals must work with whatever material is at hand’ (2000, 159). Thus, these silences equally contribute to Sunny coming to a greater understanding of herself and her family.\textsuperscript{57}

Early in \textit{Purple threads}, the idea that knowledge is acquired in discontinuous and mosaic, rather than linear, processes is inferred by the reader. In the first story, ‘Women and dogs in a working man’s paradise’, Sunny introduces the reader to Nan and the Aunties. She describes the daily task of accompanying Aunty Boo into the hillsides to collect tufts of wool off fences, or cut off the backs of dead sheep, to be used for weaving and knitting, and picking up stray or abandoned animals to be taken home and added to an ever expanding menagerie: ‘our wheelbarrow was always full of

\textsuperscript{56} While I use the term “information” here, I acknowledge that it is an inadequate descriptor for the tangible and intangible material we use to construct knowledge. We receive snippets, either directly given to us (however filtered and impartial), or observed, discovered, happened upon by ourselves, through which we make inferences and speculate about certain truths. Nevertheless, alternative terms, such as data, wisdom, or intelligence, seem equally constrained.

\textsuperscript{57} This discussion about family knowledge is developed more fully in Kadmos, 2014c.
lucky lambs and our bags packed with dead wool, all gleaned by women in a working man’s paradise’ (6). One original meaning of the word glean is ‘to gather or pick up ears of corn which have been left by the reapers’, which implies the skimming-off of the produce of the dominant, “regular” world (OED, 2013). Common usage of the word broadens its definition to include the processes by which a person gains knowledge: piecemeal, or slowly. Together, these meanings suggest the processes by which the less powerful in society, such as Aboriginal women and children in 1960s Australia, learned what they needed to survive. For Nan and the Aunties, their home, where they were mostly physically confined, was dominated by the father and sons. Beyond the home was the male-dominated farming community that controlled land on all sides of their plot, and white society. Understanding of white cultural assumptions and practices would have been important for these women as they navigated their way through these dominant cultures. This is suggested in one scene where Aunty Boo is using binoculars to spy on a gathering of local white farmers. When Aunty Bubby asks her what she’s doing, she says: ‘never ya mind, sista-girl. I’m jus’ keepin an eye out. Learnin’ lotsa things ’bout this lot’ (143).

For Sunny, the dominant world is the one inhabited by the adults who own and control knowledge about the family and the world, to be given or withheld at their discretion. The short story cycle, as a composite of separate experiences in different stories, also leaves the reader to glean information, make links, cross-reference and draw conclusions. In this way the reading process itself aptly parallels how Sunny pieces together the information she
gathers, directly through knowledge that is specifically and intentionally imparted to her, or indirectly through what she understands from a look, tone of voice, or silence. This forms the knowledge base about her family and her place in society.

Philosopher Lorraine Code claims that ‘knowledge of other people is possible only in a persistent interplay between opacity and transparency, between attitudes and postures that elude a knower’s grasp, and traits that seem to be clear and relatively constant’ (1991, 38). The “truth”, therefore, about others (and therefore a sense of oneself and one’s family), is constructed from what can and cannot be told, what is and what is not known. What remains unspoken in a family, therefore, also contributes to a whole picture that forms. As a writer, Leane had to grapple with writing stories about her relatives when she did not know the full extent of some of the events she relates, and while understanding that some of these stories represented experiences that caused pain and suffering to people she loved. The short story cycle, which resists narrative closure, thus provides Leane with opportunities to include the unknowable in her family’s story. While other narrative forms can, of course, handle silences, the short story cycle seems to be especially suited to this task because, by its very structure of independent, yet related stories, it does not promise to answer all questions, or resolve all ambivalence but allows some loose ends to dangle between and beyond the stories. Not all of the stories in Purple threads are fully explained, and one of the reasons for this is that the child, who is recounting these experiences, may never have heard all the details. Aunty Boo warned
this would be the case early in the text when she says, ‘ya never give away ya best secrets’ (26). Nevertheless, Leane admitted that not everyone was comfortable with the idea of loose ends in the book. She said that one of the early editorial readers of her manuscript said that she’d ‘written some good stuff’ but that she should close off some of the stories and answer more questions. Leane said that her reply to this had been, ‘but I don’t know. I don’t know.’

As a short story cycle Purple threads depicts how women gain knowledge, about their histories and their present, in relational processes that are fragmentary and sometimes discontinuous. Knowledge is built over time, not purely through a linear trajectory or the empirical abilities of individual subjects, but through processes that engage others, through repetition and return, and revisiting the past with fresh ears and eyes, conjuring once again the spiralling shape of the helix which represents, too, the recursive processes involved in reading the short story cycle. This understanding of how knowledge is gained is foundational to the exploration, across the stories, of how personal and cultural identity is both cumulatively formed and yet always contingent, a theme developed in the following section.

**Relational identity**

A key theme that develops through the successive stories in Purple threads is how personal identity is intrinsically tied to a subject’s social context and formed through interrelationships with others. The acquisition of self-

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58 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, December 2011.
knowledge, therefore, is an active and interactive process. As Meyers remarks:

Intersectional subjects analyse their position in social hierarchies, interpret the psychic impact of their social experience, and reconfigure their identities as members of social groups (2000, 154).

The independent, internally coherent nature of the stories in this short story cycle works in two specific ways to develop these themes about relational identity. On one level, each story sheds light on how Sunny views and understands herself at a particular time in her life. At another level, by reading the stories together, the reader is shown how this character’s self-knowledge changes at different stages of her maturity, as Sunny comes to see her intersectional identity as an awareness and experience of self that is modified in different contexts and communities. At the same time, the reader’s understanding of Sunny also undergoes change. Therefore, through both the independent and interrelated natures of the stories, the cycle explores how identity is not fixed, but is rather relational, fluid and contingent. 59

From the security of the family, as an initial reference point, and through many experiences that bring her into contact with other people outside that unit, Sunny begins to learn what it means to be Aboriginal in relation to the white other. Langton explores this notion. She says that

Aboriginality is not just a label to do with skin colour or the particular ideas a person carries around in his/her head which might be labelled Aboriginal, such as an Aboriginal language or kinship

59 A version of this section appears in Kadmos, 2014a.
system. Aboriginality is a social thing in the sense used by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Aboriginality arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book (2005, np).

Aboriginality, as Langton argues, is not an essential identity. And in Purple threads, Sunny’s experiences, as she engages with the wider, white, community, demonstrate the processes by which Aboriginality, like all identities, is socially constructed.

What follows are four examples from different stories in Purple threads that illustrate how the short story cycle can work to develop this notion of relational identity. Each story focuses on a separate incident in Sunny’s life which in some way shapes her sense of self. Taken separately, each event reveals something about how Sunny’s interpretation of her experiences causes some shift, however slight, in her knowledge of herself, her family and others. When these events are read together, they bring to light how identity changes, modifies and adapts according to different social and historical contexts. This discussion also demonstrates the unique function that the longer story, within the short story cycle, can serve.

‘God’s Flock’

Set when Sunny is about five years old, this early story in the cycle has her sharing memories of going to church, and ruminating on the role of religion in the family. She grumbles as she and Star are dressed for Sunday school: fixed up in their best dresses, their hair tied with freshly ironed ribbons, and
their feet trapped into patent leather shoes. Once ready, Nan tells Sunny to go and stand by the wall for a final check, so that she can ’ave a good look at youse. Gotta make sure ya look like somebody owns ya’ (11). Sunny reminisces, ‘I always thought that was a crazy thing to say. Everyone in the district should know who owned us but I knew better than to ask’ (11). Later, when Aunty Boo arrives at the church to drop the girls off, Sunny complains:

‘Why do we hafta go?’ I’d bark though pouting lips.
‘Because,’ would come the standard reply, ‘youse hafta look respectable jus’ like me an’ Bubby an’ all the other Aunties did when we were little. An’ white people, they think churches are respectable an’ sometimes ya hafta go along with what other people think, jus’ to stay outta trouble.’
‘But youse never go to church!’ I was relentless trying to get out of this religion thing.
‘Big people can’t get taken,’ she’d huff (12–13).

The scene is humorous but the story reveals a deep disconnect between the girls’ understanding of their situation as Aboriginal children in 1960s rural NSW, and the very real fears the women have about the girls’ safety and security. Aunty Boo’s blunt reply alerts the reader that, while Sunny’s childhood memories are on one level innocent and amusing, the text will not spare the reader darker realities, such as the Aunties’ very real fear of having the children taken away under the then prevalent attitudes towards and practices of Aboriginal child welfare and “breeding out” of colour. As a community narrative, the Aunties’ words and actions here reflect what many Aboriginal women experienced.60

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60 Moreton-Robinson claims that ‘Indigenous women lived life under a vague but real sense of threat that their children would be taken from them … Their experiences told them that their lives could be disrupted at any moment by government officials, and, of course, that the closest relationships were often the ones most at risk’ (2000, 12).
It is clear that in this story, at such a young age, Sunny has no reason to share the women’s fears, and cannot comprehend the threat to her security. Over time however, as the next story shows, increased contact with the outside world, “educates” her about the ways some others in the wider community view her and her family, and their lifestyle.

‘Coming home’

In Purple threads, ‘Coming home’ is the longest story in the cycle and one that seems to be pivotal in shaping Sunny’s awareness of her personal and ethnic identity. It covers a particularly difficult time in the girls’ lives when they are taken away from their home by their mother Petal—who drifts in and out of their lives—and their father Dinny, whom they have never met. They travel hundreds of miles to visit their white relatives where ‘the flat country was a haze of swaying grasses and massive, sparsely leaved reddish-black trees’ (75)—and where, unbelievably, there are no sheep. This story is also framed by one of the most enduring stories in western literature of a child’s journey to a strange country, and her yearning desire to go home—The wizard of OZ. We are told it is Sunny’s favourite book. There follows a series of images that conjure parallels with this famous tale: the travelling circus and mysterious man (in the form of the rodeo and Sunny’s cowboy father); the surprise of being whisked away from home; the weariness of a long journey and the terrors in unfamiliar land, where women appear as witches and nothing is as it seems; and, finally, the return.
This is also an important story for exploring Sunny’s relationship with her mother, and to question, largely western ideas, about who is a mother, who can mother, and what mothering is, through the juxtaposition of the Aunties’ constant care for the girls, and Petal’s unpredictable and sometimes self-serving efforts to do so. When Petal informs the Aunties of her intentions to take the girls to meet Dinny’s family, the news sends ‘a harpoon through the women that split blubber from bone’ (63). Aunty Boo says, ‘Don’t be mad, Petal … ya know what can happen ta the kids if the authorities think they bein’ neglected … we always looked afta’ them fer ya …’ (64). And old Nan says, shaking, ‘but they’re strangers, Petal’ (64). This provides Petal with her only drawcard, her biological connection to her children. She throws back at the women their own professed commitment to family ties: ‘They’re family! Even if we haven’t met ’em yet’ (65).

On arrival at the station, their new family seems cold and unfamiliar. Of her father’s sister, a nun, Sunny says ‘Sister Bernadette was the strangest looking woman I’d ever seen, story books and all. She was tiny with weird, red crinkly skin’ (70). And she asks her grandmother, ‘Who’s that funny lady dressed up like a witch?’ (69). There is very little for the girls to do on the farm, and instances when they do interact with their grandparents leave Sunny feeling that she has failed, in some way, to have understood her grandmother’s expectations: ‘[Grandma] looked daggers at Star and me

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61 Sunny’s remarks “return the gaze” of the marginalized other, reminding readers that an Aboriginal girl, for instance, may also observe differences that are foreign and perplexing in comparison to her realities. Arising from postcolonial studies, and impacting on literary, linguistic and visual culture, the return of the gaze describes the ‘potential activity occurring once the relational and unstable dynamics of [the see/being seen dyad] are reactivated’ (Amad, 2013).
when I grabbed a piece of bread from a plate in the middle of the table before the adults were all seated’ (70). She resorts to napping to protect herself from her family’s confusing attentions and during one of these moments she overhears the following conversation about Petal:

‘I wanted a good Catholic girl for our Dinny …’ I could hear Grandma’s lament to Paddy and Sister Bernadette carried on the hot breeze … ‘But an Abo! Lord, what did I do to deserve these trials and tribulations?’ (74)

Sunny is unsettled not just by the unfamiliar term, but also the tone of voice with which it is uttered, and the reactions the word arouses. For instance, trying to minimize his wife’s negative attitude towards Petal’s ethnicity, Sunny’s grandfather, Paddy, says ‘she’s not a full-blood … she’s got some white in her. Looks to me like she’s less than half Abo. And the kids, you can hardly tell’ (74).

These are the first references to any form of the word Aboriginal in the text, which until this story, centres exclusively on the family as they look outwards towards the world.62 Sunny, confused by the tone in Grandma’s voice, as much as the unfamiliar word, broaches the topic with Petal:

‘What’s an Abo?’ I asked her.

Petal wasn’t good at explaining things like the Aunties were, and she wasn’t patient either. The colour in her face rose.

‘Wait here!’

Petal found Dinny with Paddy on the veranda, smoking and drinking tea …

‘Get here!’ Petal’s coal eyes flamed and she stamped her foot …

Later, above the clinking of the cups and plates for afternoon tea, we heard harsh words coming from the kitchen …

62 The lack of importance of the term Aboriginal to the family’s sense of its own identity, is in keeping with the claims by Langton as quoted above, and when she comments that ‘before Captain Cook and Governor Phillip, there was no Aboriginality in the sense it is meant to day … [and while] Aboriginal people saw whites as a group, they did not see them as a “race”. This was a concept of the whites’ (2005, np).
‘You’ll have a bit of respect, Mother!’ (75–6)

The conversations impact on Sunny greatly, even if she doesn’t fully understand why. Claims by scholar Hilary Weaver (writing about the Native American context) that the language used by the coloniser to describe the colonised powerfully influences understandings about identity, are pertinent here:

The constructionist approach to representation states that meaning is constructed through language. Thus, the words we choose to use such as American Indian, Native American, or First Nations not only reflect but shape identity … Today, Native people often learn about themselves and their culture in English and therefore adopt some stereotypes and distorted meanings (2001, 242–3).

As a young Aboriginal girl in rural Australia in the 1960s, Sunny must have struggled to absorb the full meanings and implications of these outsider perceptions of her family’s ethnicity. Eventually even Petal realises the risks involved in staying in such a hostile environment. In this moment of need she reveals some of the determination and protectiveness shown Nan and the Aunties. She seeks the help of the local postie, Pete, a strange woman who ‘sat on the ground with the men near the front steps and smoked, drank tea and swore’ (84), but who, like the Great Wizard, recognises a desperate situation when she sees it: ‘Had enough, eh? … need to escape the Wild West?’ (89). While the rest of the family are out, Petal packs their bags and she and the girls do escape, not in a hot air balloon but in Pete’s ‘seedy smelling van’ (90). The trip home by train takes a couple of days with limited funds for food, and some uncomfortable moments when, for instance, ‘the waitress on the train looked daggers as Petal kicked off her
shoes and blew smoke rings into the air’ (92). But Petal does get them home. So exhausted is Sunny by her efforts to comprehend and adjust to her new family in Queensland that when she reaches the Aunties’ house she is overcome with the relief of being in a place where she understands the rules, and feels accepted and safe:

My head was thumping with questions and stories about strangers and horses and cattle and peddlers and charlatans and prayers and dingo shooters and nuns and chores and Abos but I just wanted to sit back and eat as much as I wanted with my feet up on my chair and listen and laugh and fall into bed on the old club lounge by the kitchen window (93).

This story covers some events in Sunny’s life that greatly disrupt her stability and security. It also takes its time to explore this mother–child relationship. This extended period when the girls are “mothered” by Petal is significant and needs the consideration given in this lengthier story; however, as the story is only one part of the short story cycle, the reader is encouraged to see Petal’s role in Sunny’s life in relation to everything else that is conveyed in the remaining stories. Nan, Aunty Boo and Aunty Bubby create the enduring family bonds that Sunny needs. Although this mother-child relationship could be explored in a book of its own, here it is not meant to. The cycle provides the space to examine this aspect of Sunny’s life without promising any further development. In this example, the short story cycle also enables an exploration of the development of Sunny’s personal and cultural identity. Here, we see that she has gained some awareness that her understandings of what family is and means are not as simple as they seem at home. Growing up and moving beyond her family
may bring difficult and confusing challenges that she cannot anticipate. As
the reader progresses through the independent stories in the cycle, other
significant moments in Sunny’s life reinforce the idea that identity is
contingent and relational.

‘Purple threads’
This title story explores how transitions can sometimes be painful
experiences. The reader sees the two girls struggle to adapt to school life,
where, for the first time, they are exposed to some of the racist attitudes that
their Aunties, by keeping and educating them at home, have tried to protect
them from. Sunny is excited at the prospect of making new friends.
However, her hopes are dashed when she discovers that some children at
school have been forbidden to play with her because their parents have told
them that the Aunties are “black witches”. Sunny is mortified, but becomes
further incensed when she tells her Aunties this devastating discovery, and
they do not respond in the outraged way she expected and wanted them to.
Instead, they demonstrate a nonchalance that Sunny isn’t mature enough to
share:

I waited for her angry reaction. It didn’t come. Aunty Bubby
stopped her cutting and stood calmly with the bread knife in her
hand. A big smile spread across her face.
‘I wanted to be a witch when I was young,’ she announced (105).

This is one of several instances in Purple threads that unsettle stereotypes
by reminding the reader that many Indigenous people have dual or
multicultural heritage and therefore access to multiple sources of knowledge
for making meaning. Aunty Bubby, rather than affirming Sunny’s
indignation, continues with a history lesson about the witch hunts of the Middle Ages (107) and Aunty Boo attempts to offer comfort by drawing on the words of the Greek philosopher, Epictetus, weaving in once again the purple motif that helps tie the stories in the cycle together:

‘When Epictetus’ mates told him he should be more like everyone else, he came back real smart like an’ said to ’em, *Because you consider yourself to be only one thread of those that are in a toga it is fitting that you take care how you should be like the rest of men, just as the thread has no design to be anything superior to other threads. But I wish to be purple, that small part which is bright and makes everything else graceful and beautiful. Why then do you tell me to make myself like many? And if I do, how shall I still be purple?’* (108–9; italics in original).

The Aunties’ responses infuriate and confuse Sunny, who is torn between loyalty to her family and her desire to have friends, a yearning she believes her Aunties do not understand. The story concludes with Sunny emotionally vulnerable, poignantly questioning the impact of her intersectional identity in a world dominated by representations that appear to exclude her:

I couldn’t tell them I wanted to be white then. But if I was white I’d see myself everywhere. In the classroom, when I opened up a book or looked at a picture. In the crowded playground, laughing, skipping and jumping between elastics. Down the main street in town. Or on the movie screen. I’d not stand out from the rest. But purple? Black? Too hard. Too ugly. Too different (109).

Sunny’s words here reveal her awareness that identity is relational, and inextricably linked to belonging. That self-acceptance of one’s identity as a social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience can be aided by the validation of the communities we are situated within (or without). The isolating experience of not-belonging and its impact on identity is explored in the final example.
‘Land grab’

This fourth example completes the depiction of Sunny’s transition from the happy, imaginative and playful child the reader is introduced to in the earlier stories to a circumspect teenager, whose interactions with the wider world have increased her sense of isolation rather than lessened it, showing how relationships are not always life-enriching. The sisters have outgrown the adventurous games in the countryside around the property that kept them entertained during their childhood, but these have not been replaced with the kind of pursuits their peers in town enjoy. On a hot afternoon, bored, and lazing on the veranda, Sunny reflects on the “differences” that isolate them, literally and figuratively, on the fringes of the town. Thinking about the Aunties’ strong attachment to their old property, she complains

‘Stupid bloody land! … We could go ta town an’ have a flash house … An’ I could ’ave friends … an’ … people would think we were normal.’

‘It won’t make any difference,’ Star said … ‘People won’t think we’re normal no matta what we do. Get used to it’ (131).

The conversation is overheard by the Aunties who are deeply hurt. They decide to tell the girls the story of how they secured the home for themselves and the nieces. They reveal that in preparing for his death, William presumed to leave his wife and unmarried daughters in the care of his son Richie, who Aunty Bubby claims was ‘never smart … All he wanted ta do was wait til the ol’ man died an’ sell the place’ (133–34). Knowing they would be out of a home, Aunty Boo decided to intervene. She plotted and schemed, drew on her bookkeeping and masterful negotiation skills, and even practised forgery to manipulate her father into keeping the house and
garden apart from the rest of the estate, thereby ensuring some future
security for the unmarried sisters. In recounting this story, the Aunties
convey pride in their skilful dealings that obtained the title on the house, and
gratitude for their home’s comfort, not resentment of its simplicity:

‘So now youse know how I grabbed this little bit o’ land fer us an’
I won’t give it up, never. Ya’ll hafta carry me outta here in a box
before I’ll be goin’ anywhere!’
‘Me too,’ Nan said.
‘An’ me.’ Aunty Bubby set her lips firmly.
All my visions of a house in town vanished out the window (140).

Their conviction is overwhelming, but not comforting, leaving Sunny
feeling defeated rather than satisfied, and painfully aware that her belonging
to one community—her family—may leave her excluded from other
communities throughout her life.

As independent texts, these stories focus on particular events, encouraging
the reader to reflect on how each has an impact on Sunny given her age and
understanding at the time. But working together, the interrelatedness of the
stories shows how Sunny’s racial and cultural identity changes as she grows
up, through interactions with others. We see how increased contact with the
outside world, beyond the loving protection of her family and home, educate
her about the ways that her family, and their lifestyle, are viewed by the
white community. It is a process of shifting identity as she measures her
own perceptions against those of other people. As a community narrative,
these stories contribute to building a picture of the kinds of complex
experiences many Aboriginal people have encountered under colonisation.
Conclusion

Leane found the short story cycle to be a suitable form for conveying the many incidents and influences that she remembers as particularly formative in her life. The cycle enabled her to capture the recursive nature of a woman’s links to her past, how those links embed in the present, and also shape the future. While each story in the cycle has its own narrative arc, larger themes develop as the book assembles a broader picture that encompasses the family’s past and future.

Themes explored include Sunny’s growing self-knowledge about herself and how others see her, and the recognition that identity is not fixed but relational and flexible, changing over time and in response to different circumstances, and is ultimately a journey towards a shared end with others to whom she is inextricably connected. An important factor in this learning is how knowledge is shared in families, how children sometimes clumsily piece together snippets and fragments in order to make sense of the adult world they will one day venture into independently.

The reading practices provoked by the short story cycle parallel thematic threads in Purple threads. For instance, by treating these experiences separately, in independent stories, the cycle encourages the reader to make connections, cross-reference between stories, and more fully understand the narrative as a complex of layers rather than linear strands or trajectories. Further, the reader is able to reflect on these different experiences in the pauses after small resolutions of minor narrative arcs in the various stories.
comprising the short story cycle. In these ways, the independence and
interrelatedness of the stories, the emphasis on apparently isolated events,
the presence of unresolved threads and the space for the longer story, enable
a diversity of material and themes to be explored in a relatively
circumscribed text.

The stories in *Purple threads* each tell the reader something different about
the experiences of one Aboriginal girl growing up in a loving family in
Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. And as a short story cycle it contributes to
a strong canon of community narratives that help to build a broader picture
about the diverse experiences of Indigenous families and communities, past
and present, and the relational aspects of subjects as socially situated beings.
Conclusion

This thesis argues that the short story cycle is a suitable narrative form for representing women’s relational lives through the focus on minor narrative arcs about their ordinary experiences as they engage in relationships with others. It explores this claim through an original work of fiction, and a critical discussion that examines how unique conventions of the form have been used by writers to tell stories about women. One overarching theme of the fiction, which opens the thesis, is how an intimate relationship changes over time, and how different phases of that relationship are prompted, and in turn shaped by, personal transformations within the central character, a woman named Connie. The dissertation examines several features of the short story cycle in detail by drawing on specific examples from short story cycles about women written in the decades following second-wave feminism, and culminates in a close reading of a contemporary cycle about three generations of Aboriginal women and girls in Australia.

This thesis draws on the feminist concept of relational autonomy, which does not define any one philosophical concept, but functions as an umbrella term for a range of perspectives that emphasise the notion of the self as socially embedded, and by which the structures and relationships that tie an individual to others make autonomy possible (Westlund, 2009, 26). Therefore, in this context autonomy, understood as the ability to reflect on
and make decisions based on the authentic values and desires of the person, can be achieved even while accepting that those values and choices may be shaped and informed in some way through relationships of obligation and care (Christman, 2004, 148–9). It is this concept of autonomy that underpins the processes of personal transformation and self-determination that emerge through many stories about women, which the short story cycle represents structurally and thematically. As Kelley claims, of the feminist subject in short story cycles: ‘negotiating between coherence and fragmentation, as well as between autonomy and interactivity, this subject is aware of its multiple, ideologically interpolated subject-positions and, in fact, consequently is able to act subversively’ (1995, 305). This thesis has shown how the interweaving of recurrent themes and motifs, the emphasis on minor narrative arcs, the prevalence of mosaic rather than linear narrative structures (and consequent prioritising of theme over chronological time) and the silences within and between stories, are features of the short story cycle that enable these distinctive representations of women’s relational lives.

In order to bring together the threads of this thesis, and suggest areas for development for future research, this conclusion draws briefly on one final short story cycle to highlight the characteristics of the form that are explored in this thesis, and to demonstrate different ways in which the form is being used by contemporary writers. Other potential areas for further research, including thematic developments, are also mentioned.
Further developments in the form

Traditionally, short story cycle theory has focused on cycles that are conceived as whole texts. The inclusion of a mini short story cycle within collections of short stories, might be one avenue to follow for further research into this form. *Where the god of love hangs out* (2011) is a collection of short stories by American writer Amy Bloom. Amongst the otherwise unconnected stories are two small story cycles consisting of four stories each, entitled ‘William and Clare’ and ‘Lionel and Julia’. This sets the collection apart from other cycles examined in this thesis. Here, the short story cycle is not the *entire* text, but is utilised *within* the text to tell two particular stories about women. Interestingly, in both cases the stories explore how a significant relationship changes and impacts on the central characters over time, a theme that, it may be assumed, Bloom judged could best be articulated in a story cycle. This conclusion looks more closely at the first of these mini cycles.

‘William and Clare’ is about a middle-aged man and woman who, married to Isabel and Charles respectively, and having been friends for many years, now launch into a sexual affair. The four stories cover several years, with time passing indicated by occasional references to William and Clare’s adult children as they marry and start their own families. Each of the first three stories occur within very short timeframes—the first only an hour or so, and the second and third during two different afternoons. The last story is different, spanning a longer period so that the ramifications of a major shift in the couple’s relationship can be explored. Point of view also differs
between the individual stories. Only the first story is told in the first person, from Clare’s point of view. Nevertheless, having been privy to Clare’s innermost thoughts at the start, the reader is positioned to read the subsequent stories, narrated in third person, as Clare’s story. From this perspective, the cycle is a woman’s story that privileges the importance of relationships to the processes by which a woman develops a greater sense of herself over time.

Many of the features of the short story cycle discussed in this thesis can be identified in ‘William and Clare’ to show how the relationship between the two lovers is not negotiated in an isolated social and temporal plane inhabited by the two of them alone, but is considered and reconsidered, fostered and reshaped, over time, in the context of their relationships with friends, spouses, children, extended family and others. William and Clare’s relationship is not explored as expansively as it might be in a novel. Typically for a short story cycle, the subsequent stories glimpse into their lives at intervals, homing in on particular events that nevertheless amplify the development of the relationship and its impact on the central and, to a lesser degree, minor characters. The internal integrity of the stories provoke the necessary tension that Mann writes about (1989, 18), leaving the reader free to go no further after reading one story, or to read on to find out more about the lovers. However, as discussed in previous chapters, the reader must be prepared for some of their questions about minor characters or specific events not to be answered in following stories. Only what is absolutely necessary to explore this one aspect of Clare’s and William’s
lives is offered to the reader. The events that are chosen to represent changes in the relationship are generally unremarkable, part of the fabric of ordinary lives. They occur in the private, domestic spaces of home and family, and while the narrative present of each story follows chronologically from the previous story, the stories nevertheless jump back and forth in time—typically as we have seen in short story cycles—to extend the particular theme being explored.

In the space of four short stories about mundane events in daily life, with so little textual webbing between them and relying heavily on the silences between the few scenes the reader is privy to, the textual components of ‘William and Clare’ nevertheless provide an engaging picture of how one woman has achieved autonomy, and has made choices based on her own authentic sexual desires. These decisions are formed within the context of a range of relationships throughout her life, from youth to late middle-age, and prompted by several mundane experiences that are nevertheless significant triggers for self-reflection and ultimately change. Because the whole picture of Clare’s life as a mother, wife, friend and lover is so important in developing these themes, the snapshot approach that the short story cycle so effectively employs serves this story well.

If research uncovers that Bloom’s book is not an isolated example, but that other contemporary authors are drawing on the cycle form in different ways to suit different purposes, this trend might suggest that the short story cycle is becoming more widely recognised as a distinct form in its own right, and
the unique opportunities it offers writers better understood. It would also be interesting to explore how the impact on the narrative action and themes thus developed differs between a full-length cycle, and one as brief as ‘William and Clare’, where the features of the cycle emerge in sharp focus, and can be seen to be working to maximum effect to illustrate change over time.

Another feature of short story cycles written in the new millennium, and which we see in ‘William and Clare’, is the strong presence of the male character’s perspective within a woman’s story. What little the reader sees and hears of William is filtered through Clare’s eyes, and yet he is more fleshed out and rounded than many of the male characters in the cycles drawn on as key examples in this thesis. Of course, stories about women inevitably include male characters because women share their lives and societies with boys and men in a great variety of relationships. And men and women do write short story cycles about men too. However, the focus in this thesis has been on the suitability of the form to represent women’s lives because a wealth of cycles can be drawn on to reasonably conclude that the form is often used by writers wanting to tell stories about women’s ordinary experiences. Many of the cycles drawn on in this thesis were written during or just after the height of second-wave feminism in western societies (The beggar maid, The women of Brewster Place), and may reflect the specific focus on women deemed culturally significant and politically strategic at the time. Nevertheless, some recent cycles written by western writers include individual stories about male central characters. For example, Olive
*Kitteridge* includes several stories from the perspective of a male character, even as the cycle as a whole develops around an evolving picture of Olive. And in a different way, *A visit from the goon squad*, and Australian cycles, *Having cried wolf* and *The dark wet*, focus less on the trajectory of a primary character (woman or man) and portray the interconnecting lives of several characters of different genders, and how those relationships inform and affect self and others over time.

The inclusion of male central characters in some contemporary short story cycles may reflect a greater concern with the community over the individual, and/or indicate lingering discomfort by younger writers over perceived restrictions associated with feminism, some of which are explored in Chapter Three. Fear of appearing anti-male by focusing too overtly on women may be one of these anxieties.63 Further research may explore how the short story cycle represents women’s relationships with men and other women, and non-heteronormative relationships, in contemporary western societies where feminists’ continued determination to name gender equality and suggest alternative personal, social and political structures is so often questioned.64

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63 Emma Watson, a young British actress famous for her role in the *Harry Potter* movie franchise, and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, is a good example of the conflict young women may feel when grappling with the realities of gender inequality in a society that, for the most part, devalues the continued relevance of feminism. In a speech delivered at the launch of the HeForShe campaign to bring men and women together to end gender inequality, Watson said: ‘The more I have spoken about feminism, the more I have realised that fighting for women’s rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating …. For the record, feminism by definition, is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes’ (Anderson, 2014).

64 An area for further exploration is the way in which contemporary themes of interest to younger writers, such as the inescapable reality of modern warfare, are represented and narrated in the short story cycle. Australian Shrim’s *Having cried wolf* (2010), already
This thesis claims that much of the critical material written in English on the short story cycle emerges from scholarly work in the United States. An important research objective in this project has been to increase awareness of the creative and critical work being done around the form in Australia. Therefore, attention is drawn to several Australian research projects and short story cycles. The cycle, *Purple threads*, is dealt with through explorations of its place in the tradition of life-writing by Aboriginal women in this country, and through closer inspection of how the features of the form facilitate storytelling about Aboriginal women and girls. *Purple threads*, though a recent example of the form, continues in the vein of earlier “feminist” cycles by privileging storytelling about women. This might support claims by scholars such as Brewster that since colonisation women have come to occupy a more central position in Aboriginal community and family life (Brewster, 1996a, 9). How this development is represented in short story cycles written by and about Indigenous women could be explored as a topic of its own. As noted above, *Purple threads* sits in company with several other contemporary short story cycles by Indigenous women writers. This growing field could be explored for trends in new ways of representing the Indigenous experience in Australia.

Drawing on Nagel’s claims, stated at the beginning of this discussion, the short story cycle has been used widely in many cultures around the world by writers of different ethnic backgrounds. How women’s relational lives are mentioned in this thesis, tackles the influence of war on a soldier and his young wife who is left behind. More recently, American author Phil Klay has produced a cycle of stories based on his own experiences in the Marine Corps, deployed to Iraq from 2007–2008 (2014).
represented through some of the culturally specific and cross-cultural trends in this broader field beyond western literary traditions would extend the necessarily limited scope presented here.\textsuperscript{65}

_The beggar maid_, _The women of Brewster Place_, _Olive Kitteridge_, _Purple threads_, ‘William and Clare’ and the other cycles referred to in this thesis, represent developments in American and Australian short story cycles from the height of second-wave feminism in the west to the present day. Sharing a strong focus on women’s ordinary lives, they explore how women come to a greater sense of themselves and their authentic desires—for personal and shared ends—through relationships of obligations to care for and attachment to others over the course of their lives. Short story cycle theorists have shown that the form is an adaptable, flexible genre that has been used for different purposes for centuries. Current indications suggest that the form is growing in popularity amongst a new generation of writers who are adapting to specific needs to represent diversity, intersectional identities, and relationality in contemporary, multicultural and postcolonial societies.

\textsuperscript{65} Two recent book chapters exploring postcolonial themes in short story cycles are worth noting here. Dirk Wiemann (2013) examines the treatment of globalisation and postcolonialism in cycles written by Indian English novelists, and Margaret Wright-Cleveland (2012) explores race and national identity in Toomer’s _Cane_ (1923) and Hemingway’s _In our time_ (1925).
Appendix

Various insights into the use of the short story cycle in chapters Four and Five of this dissertation are drawn from my formal and informal exchanges with *Purple threads* author, Jeanine Leane, over the course of this research project, from September 2011 to the present. The processes and protocols followed in the course of including Leane’s thoughts on using the short story cycle are outlined below.

In September 2011, following the public release of *Purple threads*, I contacted Leane via email to broach the idea of interviewing her for my research. Over several subsequent exchanges Leane responded positively to the idea, prompting me to initiate the process to apply for ethics approval to conduct a formal interview with her. Though normally based in Canberra, at this time Leane was living and working in New York.

Both the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* (NS) and the *Murdoch HREC policy on Ethics in Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* were consulted in preparation for my application. In particular, as the research participant was an Indigenous person, I was required to attach a separate statement ‘outlining how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sensitivities will be addressed’ (NS 4.7). In response to this requirement I sought peer review feedback on my research application and all protocols were duly followed.
Following successful granting of ethics approval, I instigated a formal interview. I forwarded a list of questions and discussion points to Leane to enable her to consider her responses ahead of our conversation. Between us we arranged a mutually suitable time to discuss these points via Skype. The first discussion was carried out in video format and recorded with an audio device on 16 December 2011.

I maintained contact with Leane by email and phone. I endeavoured to keep her informed on a regular basis of the progress of my research. Two informal conversations occurred in person, during a research trip I made to Canberra in January 2013, and as co-participants at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature national conference in July 2013. A second formal interview was conducted in audio format via Skype in August 2013. I recorded Leane’s responses on paper.

Throughout 2013 I sought clarifications on some points raised during our conversations. When actual responses, directly quoted or paraphrased, were selected for incorporation into the thesis, I sent these sections to Leane via email and sought her permission for their inclusion.

An added opportunity to engage with Leane occurred in August 2014. With support from the Krishna Somers Foundation, I co-hosted a research visit by Leane to Murdoch University. Leane delivered a paper on the intersection between the personal and the professional, the creative writer and the
scholar. During this visit I sought informal feedback from Leane on some of the ideas I was working on in relation to creative non-fiction and the short story cycle.

Leane maintained the right to amend the context in which her words were used in my thesis, or withdraw her participation altogether, right up until the submission of the thesis for examination.
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