

## **Walking to Work**

### **Community and Contact**

---

JAN IDLE

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

---

To write is to touch, share, appear: writing is therefore an expression of community.<sup>1</sup>

—MOVING HOUSE

For a long time I have been thinking about moving house. I never really intended to stay this long where I am, settled. A place of comfortable familiarity—I had always felt that while I lived here I didn't really belong and perhaps moving somewhere else would alleviate that feeling, though it is a familiar feeling—the feeling of not belonging, in Australia. White, middle-aged, middle-class comfort, so comfortable it gradually becomes unsettling. I began reading about community and contact to investigate the white (dis)comfort and (un)settled nature of place—'community: a gift to be renewed and communicated'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time I longed for an engagement with the everyday, to write community through the pedestrians and inhabitants of the streets on my walk to work. Along the lane, onto the main road, past the school, the hospital, the park, the long high stonewall of the art school, the

law courts, the square, the pub, the station. My steps, like a puzzle on the city in a rhythm that guided me through the traffic of community and contact, history and memory. A repetitive movement daily re-enacted, a walk frequently interrupted; like traffic signs on the street making me stop and change direction or sometimes waving me through.

I came to the city having been born in a mining town, (Wangkathaa country), on the edge of the red sand of the Great Victoria Desert. I moved nomadic through fifteen different places before I settled here, in Kings Cross, Sydney, not far from Rushcutter's Bay Park, the site of one of the many conflicts of colonial arrival in 1788 (29 May 1788).<sup>3</sup> Settled here but like Alphonso Lingis's intruder, the intruder who interrupts the existing order, now unsettling community through writing.<sup>4</sup> The intruder holds an antagonistic presence, which is useful in thinking about community and contact. How the intruder is recognised and who does the recognising determines the critical moment when the intruder transforms into being of community.

—WOMERAH LANE

I slam shut the blue front door, almost trip on the chewed doormat, descend the narrow steps, skipping the last one, then push the gate forward to make it easy to open. The lock slides smoothly and I prevent Stella, our pet rabbit, from escaping by nudging her gently with the heel of my foot. I pass through quickly and return the latch, which makes a clean, satisfying click. I enter the street.

I greet the cigar-smoking pimp who lives next door. He is up early taking his daughter to school. He moved next door about five or six years ago from the downstairs of the terrace opposite, closer to the corner store just along the lane; dumping a skip load of unwanted junk and rubbish onto the street in the process. It took five council guys half a day to clean it up. This is a crowded street, people, cats, dogs; it is a community that easily reflects the streets described by Richard Sennett where 'deviance is the freedom made possible in the crowded city of lightly engaged people'.<sup>5</sup> It is a community of lightly engaged people enacting fragments of lightly engaged contact.



Womerah Lane  
(photograph: Felix Idle)

—THE PIMP NEXT DOOR

On sunny days he is sprawled over the banana lounge he has covered with a well-worn dirty-green towel, wearing faded red underpants and sunglasses. He holds his hand with the thick chain bracelet on his crutch. In the other hand is a book and his large cheap cigar rests on the edge of the bubble glass table nearby. Our front door looks over where he sits and when I open it the smoke from his cigar rushes at me and his semi-naked body boldly exposed, brazenly pumped forward, proudly displays a sagging, grey-haired chest. He is balding with scraggy tufts of hair, combed over and around his head. Outside the gate on the street he always wears a hat, usually a beret, sometimes a fedora. In the backyard he is seldom fully clothed, some part of him, some fragment, exposed.

A young woman in a very short skirt and boots once asked if ‘the colonel’ was at home. That was when his girls would come and go at the end of the night in the early morning. We could hear them calling him, again and again, trying to wake

him so they could come inside. These days he tends to rush out early and we haven't heard his name called for a while. Maybe he has a new job. Sometimes we smell him quietly opening the gate and coming home early in the morning before most people are awake.

Recently, he was reading a book called *Unlock your Creativity*. He either finished it or has put it aside now because he has returned to his airport novels. When his phone rings he jumps quickly to his feet, turns his book over and leaves it lying in the sun. Then, in a shuffling kind of way with straight legs, he jogs to meet somebody near the corner shop. On other occasions near the basketball hoop where the lane joins the avenue he talks to men in flash cars, a black Audi, or a silver Mercedes. Sometimes his daughter is there looking out for some one. When Maxine and Georgie lived up the road, Maxine would call the police to tell them he was obviously dealing but nothing ever happened. Alex, the handyman who lives on the opposite corner, thinks he must be a police informer.

A brief article about a child being left in a public bar in Kings Cross appeared in the newspaper. It was Shannon, his daughter, when she was about fourteen months old, before Lyn, her mother, moved out, when they all lived together further along the lane. When she started school Shannon lived with the local kindergarten teacher for a short time as the school was concerned that she was being neglected. They fought to keep her, he and Lyn, I saw him dressed for court in a suit. Successful in their custody battle they moved Shannon to a Catholic school further away. Now he leaves her alone at night when he goes to work.

It is cool today and he was outside reading with his shirt on, but without his hat or trousers. He stared at me as I walked up the stairs into the house. I have a policy of only speaking to him on the street, never over the fence. I decided on this when he ignored me after taking care of his daughter, locked out, again, late one night and he wasn't at home. We don't see her much now. When she was seven or eight she was often in the street playing with a ball or sitting on the cross bar of their security gate leaning over our fence looking into the house wanting company. Several times I have asked her in because it is late and she is locked out. She spends all her time on a computer now, Lyn says. Yesterday I saw him staring into our yard. We are throwing stuff out and it is piled up waiting to be taken to the tip. He seems to like rifling through the stuff left on the street and under his external stairs there is



lots of 'treasure', reclaimed rubbish, other people's junk, but his weightlifting gear and trophies are safely locked on the other side of the security gate.

It is a long time since his last haircut. Miranda used to cut it for him. She was his very skinny junkie friend and business partner. They would hold hands in the street. Shannon told me Miranda was a lesbian. She was very friendly and constantly watered the paving where he sits to sunbake, keeping it clean and neat. Beverley from two doors along would scream out in her irritated voice about water restrictions and lunatics. He and Miranda had a falling out. Apparently she stole \$1000 from him. The security gate was jemmied open and the front door broken. He keeps something in the cavity of our common wall near where we sit to watch television. We hear falling dust or loose mortar when it is shifted.

Just recently, Lyn has come back. She is always friendly. We exchanged greetings in the street and she removed some hair from my jumper. We were pregnant at the same time and met on the street then. She mentioned that Shannon had put on weight. She called their other child Tori, after Tori Spelling, I thought, the anorexic star in Beverly Hills 90210 in the mid 1990s. Just after she was born, Lyn told me he didn't believe Tori was his child and so she went into a foster home. Lyn's voice is worn in by smoking and she seems to be forever cleaning, sweeping, washing, smoking and talking loudly. Often she is waiting sitting on the ripped orange chair in the yard, locked out. Recently I have seen her waiting by the basketball hoop. Shannon has a brother, much older from a different mother, and three grown-up sisters in Western Australia. Her brother visits sometimes and it's the only time we hear her laughing.

Most days, dressed in his underpants, he drags his weightlifting gear into the yard, making a scraping noise on the bricks. (Ralph, from the avenue, says he was a contemporary of Arnold Schwarzenegger.) Then we hear a high, puffing, spitting sound in our kitchen, a kind of 'psft, psft'. The kids mimic the noise and say, 'Who am I?' Other times we hear him coughing, clearing his throat, a brief pause then, spit. Years ago, from a different balcony, every evening I could see a guy in red boxer shorts lifting weights in his bedroom behind half-drawn curtains. Exposed masculinity repeated across town, men in red underpants weightlifting, performing and defending community values.

When the council put up the 'No Stopping' signs in the lane he talked to me, incensed, in his low, mumbling, husky voice. Now he parks his unregistered gold Mercedes with number plates celebrating the centenary of Australia around the corner and late in the evening Shannon plays games with her friend hiding inside the boot. In the crevices between the sandstone blocks of the retaining wall holding up the guesthouse, opposite the shop, near where he meets his friends, my neighbour leaves his cigar cylinders, bright red containers. I've seen him push them into the small spaces between the rocks. He looks around furtively then quickly pokes them in. He looks more suspicious littering than when he is handing over small packages into the hands of the drivers in the expensive cars.

Last year the Norwegian backpackers, who lived upstairs above him, broke their lease and the owner called us. They had written their reason for leaving was that they were frightened of the underworld figure downstairs. The backpackers were all over two metres tall and fit, big muscle-bound cyclists, not the thin professionals you see on the TV. It was hard to believe he scared them that much. He used to have many more people coming and going, people calling out in the middle of the night, sometimes knocking on our door by mistake. For a long while after he moved in I took a deep breath before I opened the door to go outside, and my stomach would retch at the smell of his cigar as I hung out the washing, willing him to go away, blocking out his smell and his presence. They must have been afraid ... we were here first ... and I have frozen him out. But sometimes he interrupts, intrudes, defending his masculinity, his community.

Miranda is back and he has a fresh haircut. She told me she had been working in Melbourne. She's looking even thinner and has lost another tooth. The bones in her cheeks point forward and she is the colour of too much fake tan or some kind of liver malfunction. She has been away for nearly eighteen months, quite a stretch of time. She told me Shannon introduces her to the other parents at the school netball games as her—spare mum. The cellophane wrapping from his cigar blows under the fence into our backyard. Recently he has grown a pilgrim type beard to wear with his beret, he is limping and I notice he has new teeth. Lyn is busy sweeping and cleaning the yard.

Upturned near the weights behind the security gate rests his reading glasses and a book, *Images of Organization*. They all seem to be back.

And then—I walk in the opposite direction along the lane, warmly greeting any of the neighbours who happen to be on the street, past the primary school and into the main road that leads me up the hill toward the hospital.

—WOMERAH LANE TO TAYLOR SQUARE

In the park opposite the large teaching hospital the group of people who gather here everyday about this time are waiting. The methadone clinic is open and they are waiting for friends. They have loud welcoming conversations with each other, not passers by, and the women are especially skinny, not thin, junkie skinny in very tight jeans with long, stringy hair, very bony elbows and shoulder blades poking through their tightly fitted clothes. The men look angry and wear any variation of tracksuit or jeans with t-shirts and coats. Most of them have shortish unkempt hair and some of them have old-style tattoos, anchors and prison tattoos of spider webs, not fashion statement tattoos of Chinese characters saying love or hope. Many are missing teeth and just about everyone seems to smoke. With them are preschool-aged children in prams drinking cola or eating out of paper bags. Some are sitting near the rotunda, some on the grass, some at tables and a few on the splintered wooden bench by the bus stop. I pass by and it is like walking through their lounge room, their private space, and for some reason I think I am outside their vision and strain to hear their conversations. The busy morning traffic from the clinic envelops them and they are not really interested in what I am doing.

It takes about three minutes to cross the park.

—FORBES STREET

On the other side of the park, away from the methadone clinic, a very tall man in baggy khaki shorts, with long matted fair hair and beard wavers, staggers toward me. He looks cold. He has on well-worn boots and his socks sit midway up his calves.

‘You fucking slut,’ then mutters, ‘you can’t even root a fucking bloke.’

You fucking slut. Contact. He is talking to me. Our community fractures. I am more than a little surprised that he has noticed my presence. Mostly I am anonymous, too old for this attention, here, walking, but this time I am in his sight.



Prisoner van arriving to holding cells, Forbes St, Darlinghurst  
(photograph: Jan Idle)

Fractures of difference open out and I endeavour to hold on to notions of community as negotiation.

The contradiction of his meaning floats between us. Not an unknown tongue, a language too familiar reminding me of where I belong. If I am or were to be the fucking slut of his accusation then surely I would be able, or perhaps even inclined, to root a fucking bloke. It depends on how he says it, how I write it, how I hear it, how it is shared. If I write it in a whisper, his edges, his fury, brushes very gently against the outer part of my skin, barely audible, unfelt, like the rough lick of a dog's tongue, abrasive but harmless. But he does not whisper, it is a fierce, low, directed muttering and his voice penetrates my body reverberating inside my stomach. It is the first time for me. I am a slut virgin no longer, even at high school, when slut was fashionable, I avoided this description. Sluttish, slut, the words have passed through me uninvited, unpalatable and indigestible. I am still not sure if he is talking to me. I keep walking punctuated by thoughts of the intruder, the community and the city.

The city is a place of lightly engaged people, fragments of lightly engaged contact. 'If I am disturbed by what I see, I just keep walking and one image is replaced by another, "keep walking to stop feeling".'<sup>6</sup>

I try to stop feeling, but it doesn't really work. I keep walking, willing my brain to dismiss the uninvited aggression, but his anger has entered my body. I am frightened by his lack of reserve, his uncontained anger and his resolute fury, that feeling bursting from the edges of his skin. I turn away from his line of sight, feigning an intense curiosity in the colonial stone wall of the art school and its chiselled history. I have walked past this wall so many times it is impossible to think I may not recognise some fracture in its surface, or recall the abuse of that moment past—both mine or some other imagined from a colonial memory or haunted history. My emotional state refuses to be governed by thinking—his words have passed through skin into the gut. The brain, the central nervous system longs for detachment from his meaning but my stomach resists. The brain advising—keep walking to stop feeling, replace one image with another. But the gut will not relinquish control of the moment.<sup>7</sup> It obeys the fear evoked by the man in khaki, and I feel a strange sensation of wanting to vomit, swallow and hide simultaneously. I cannot be just a passer-by—returning the gaze of the man on the street, I have no 'licence to look'.<sup>8</sup>

It is not yet nine o'clock and I am barely awake.

It is a cool, sunny day and sharp outlines mark the edges of the sandstone wall of the art school and former gaol. It is a sharpness that only reveals itself in the cold morning light of early winter, when the fuzzy, thick heat of summer and late autumn has gone from the air, washed off by the rainstorms of May. The wall is perfectly restored, machine-made chisel marks simulate those historically made by hand. In the past ten years this wall has been cleaned, made smooth, history tidied up. The chisel marks in a well-ordered pattern, follow the original convict carving but no longer bear the texture or character of the marks that were made over a hundred years ago. Its imposing neatness cannot affect the chaos of this community, 'a being together animated by resistance, discord and disagreement'.<sup>9</sup>

My instinct is to walk quickly from the wall and the shouting man in khaki. It should be quieter here; aggressive masculine presence is usually not so great at this time of day. I attempt to reduce his words, to look past him. I try to move away from his community not silently unravel his private anger in the public space of the street



negotiating the fear of difference between us, his fear, my madness, my fear, his madness, our sex, and this contact. I will not be with him in community but rather, beside him, he will ‘furnish the space through which I move’. I push him to the ‘periphery of vision’.<sup>10</sup> I distract myself by leaving the present and thinking about what I have been reading. Community is that which is negotiated between, it is the process not an institution. ‘We are abandoned to community ... a gift. A fractured incomplete sharing’ in our community of dissonance.<sup>11</sup> There is an imperfect negotiation of singularity, a sharing of the impossibility of community and we are both exposed. I am not in the periphery of his sight—I have become his centre. He has fixated on me—fucking slut.

Behind us the sandstone wall silently contains its leaking history, ‘part of a much older story’.<sup>12</sup>



Sandstone wall, National Art School, 2007  
(photograph: Jan Idle)

Across the road, workers from the Darlinghurst Community Health Centre, the former Darlinghurst Police Station, another sandstone relic, are lighting up their cigarettes, in the warmth of the morning sun, they are looking away or at each other. The blossom trees in the caged outside area of the rehab centre next door are all bare, exposed to the weather. The khaki man can't see the smokers, he is still looking at me; I will him to the periphery. His language repels but also pulls me toward him. We share our 'finitude', our understanding of the inevitability of death. I draw away from him slowly. Then, less than fifty metres on, I stop near the Law Courts. I meet the mother of a former student from the local primary school. We have a conversation, a different moment of community, stopping our thoughts to engage with each other. We talk about her daughter and her husband. Though it is early she is carrying two heavy shopping bags. Her husband is paranoid about being followed by Vietnamese spies out to kill him, or them, and his fear embraces his family. He lives embedded in his remembered history, in that there is nothing else. In his adopted country he returns again and again to the fearful moments of his homeland. She is caught in his re-enactment.

The khaki man follows me and leans forward, he almost whispers, 'This chick wants a root too, quietly.' A quiet root, does he mean a secretive desire or a silent act, we are all his fucking sluts. It becomes impossible community our silent and almost exposed fear. Our female claim on public space struggles against his language and we are propelled into the past. My stomach reacts again. He is mistaken. I pass by, and hope that Tze cannot understand him, that my sharing with him is not with her. My sharing with her is a sharing of a reciprocal negotiation of community, a 'laying down of one's arms' in conversation in fractured community, an experience of community through contact and empathy.<sup>13</sup> Arendt suggests 'Fear of contact with strangers is a lack of willingness to engage with the present'.<sup>14</sup> This present is no unconditional gift of community, to be renewed and communicated.

Just along from the Community Health Centre smokers are the early morning drinkers, who have set themselves out of the wind, in the sun, on the steps of the closed underground art deco toilets. Some are sitting on upturned milk crates. Sometimes they look up and wave or shout a witty comment to share with their companions. Their laughter is punctuated by cheerful swearing and an occasional bout of conflict and passers by are merely 'flickering at the edge of vision',



warranting little attention.<sup>15</sup> Like the people who gather in the park, they are absorbed with their immediate present, their constructed private space on the public street. 'Nomadic, flowing, disrupted and fractured', community, a process of shared vulnerability, courting and rejecting notions of acceptance and recognition, contact 'fragmentary and episodic'.<sup>16</sup> The community of the street reflects the haunted and fractured community of the Australian settler colony, a community of (unresolved) difference, a sharing of finitude. A community founded on the deaths of others.<sup>17</sup> Walking through community, engaging with the chaos of my surroundings and our shared vulnerability through fragmentary contact.

I look back and the khaki man enters the park.

—TAYLOR SQUARE

Over the road at Taylor Square, the hangovers are stumbling from the twenty-four-hour hotels, rummaging in handbags and pockets for sunglasses to protect their eyes from the mild winter light. An impeccably dressed woman, in black suit and sheer black stockings, is washing the soles of her walking shoes in the 'water feature', a local council folly that requires endless maintenance. It collects and stores the debris and detritus from the night before, cigarette butts, wrappers, cans, bottle tops. She is surprised by the sudden spray of the fountain and jumps forward almost falling. Last week, here at the fountain, a shirtless man pulled his trousers down and stuck his bum into the face of his reluctant friend for inspection. Agitated, he turned round and the friend continued cautiously looking. Eventually the search ended, seemingly unsuccessful. The shirtless man replaced his trousers and lent back on the grassed hill with his eyes shut. My friend told me, later in the day she saw him semi clad, no one looking, surrounded by four police officers, his face pushed into the concrete near the lapping fountain.

As a teenager I lived in a smallish town in rural Western Australia, built for the timber milling industry. It took only two minutes to drive from the fruit mart corner at one end to the timber museum at the other end of the main street. If there were no cops around, if there was no one looking, 'chucking a lap' could take less than a minute. Mostly people drove slowly so they could check out the pedestrians. Newly licensed drivers would show off their 'wheels', listening to Slade at top volume. It was the first half of the 1970s. Boredom sifted through the wide streets.



Fountain, Taylor Square 2007—Watching  
(photograph: Jan Idle)

The boy who lived up the street was often in trouble with his mother. We moved into the house on the corner when I was ten. One road went the three blocks from the primary school to the high school with us in the middle. The other road led to more houses up over the hill. He lived in a weatherboard house at the top of the small slope of Highfield Street. He didn't seem bad. He was kind, slightly chubby and thoughtful. He had beautiful thick black curly hair. He was in my class both at primary school and later in high school; our names were close on the roll, Lucio Guadalino. His brother was named Frank. On Saturdays and Sundays he was always in the fruit shop serving at the cash register or stacking the corn, caulis, broccoli, brussel sprouts, potatoes or zucchinis. He was slow but strong from all the lifting.

Ours was a blue weatherboard house. The milk was delivered into an aluminium billy and left on the front veranda every Tuesday and Friday. The only time we used the front door was to get the milk or answer the knock of a stranger, enthusiastic religious folk from out of town. Mostly we kept the back door open, or if

by chance it was locked we could climb into the house through the half-empty two-way wood cupboard near the slow combustion stove in the kitchen. On the open back veranda, near Dad's timber workbench, there was always a box of fresh fruit, usually apples, but in stone fruit season, early November to February, peaches, plums or nectarines. Albert, the live-in caretaker from the high school, would make sure we were looked after. The corn season was short and in metalwork at the high school the boys made corn-holders, small metal sticks for each end of the corncob. We had a set of five.

Although the shops were close, on Thursday afternoon the vegetable truck would come by. We didn't use the vegetable truck. Mrs Ogden the widow did. She lived over the back, beyond the apple tree grafted with different varieties of fruit. She had chooks. Her hair was perfectly white, with highlights of a delicate purple rinse. She wore an impeccably pressed, clean, white lawn bowling uniform and well-applied skin-toned foundation that marked her collar. Her companion was a small lap dog with a vicious bark and bite called Cuddles. A few times after school I went to her house and she taught me how to make my father's favourite cake—the sponge, a cake that required too extravagant a use of eggs for our family. To the side of our house was a rundown, pothole covered tennis court. When it rained, which it did a lot, our mother would send us to the tennis court in our raincoats, without shoes, to play in the puddles. It was the only time she really encouraged us to 'go barefoot' and she didn't need to watch us. We sailed small boats made of leaves, threw stones and splashed around. When it wasn't covered in water we twisted our ankles playing bad tennis around the decaying bitumen.

Lucio didn't chat at the shop; he was quiet, polite and respectful. He was old for his year at school and worked hard though study didn't come easily to him and he looked tired.

The town was surrounded by orchards, market gardens and tall karri and jarrah forests. There were timber and wood chipping mills and a fruit-canning factory. When the local boys left school most of them would work in the timber industry or drive trucks carting logs north or to the chip mill. Those with land might go in for farming like their fathers and uncles. Several years after we left the Buller boys made a million dollars with the only undamaged onion crop in the south west.



Timber-tough support for woodchips  
(*Warren-Blackwood Times*, c 1976)

The girls would find work in the bank, the post office, Gomes shoes, Kay's grocer, or the drapery. Every few years there was an apprenticeship at the hair salon. I did my first day's paid work stacking clay bricks in a factory with my friend and her father who I couldn't understand. A few girls were sent to boarding school in Perth, coming home only for holidays and kept away from those who had stayed in town. I knew boys who protested in support of the logging industry and new woodchip mill. 'Greenies' were viewed with suspicion before the expression was ever used.

Later I found out the money was in the cash crop, secret marijuana plantations in the forests or uncultivated land beyond the fertile market gardens. The soil was perfect and the crop could make you rich but still vulnerable to the boredom of the smallness of the town. It was a town that could kill you prematurely; with widow makers (branches that fell suddenly from trees), freak king waves on fishing holidays down the coast, accidents on drunken weekends catching marron (freshwater crayfish), car accidents with kangaroos or road trains. We watched out for the other deaths; slow emotional suffocation and haunted history. Every day, at about 5.30 pm, we could hear her shouting Lucio's name followed by something we couldn't quite make out or understand. Then the flyscreen door would slam. From the oval half way down the street toward the primary school, about two hundred metres away, he would jump on his bike and cycle like mad up the hill. He never looked at us, even when we were playing hockey in the front yard. He didn't see us watching. She was one of those mothers who always wore a clean apron, even at the shops. Sometimes it looked like she had changed into a clean apron to go to the

supermarket. There were lots of hand-stitched, starched aprons in town. I never actually met her but knew she was watching.

Closer to us, around the corner on the other side of the road was my friend's house. Her mother never wore an apron and sometimes she drove her Ford LTD V8, with leather seats, to the shops in her fluffy slippers and glamorous synthetic quilted dressing gown. We were allowed to call her Margery. She'd pull up outside the shop and wait for her daughter, my friend, to run in and get the milk or bread or whatever she needed. Sometimes I would go too, shocked at the idea of going downtown in gown and slippers. On workdays she was up in the dark, before five, making a cooked breakfast for her demanding, angry, truck driver husband. There were often bits of carburettor from the boys' motorbikes on the kitchen table. It drove her mad but she wasn't scary, she laughed out loud, even when she was cross. She was always having a 'busy bee' to clean up after the grease and the chaos. She was the first person I ever knew to regularly buy lottery tickets and half jokingly talk about it as an opportunity. Fluffy slippers and glamorous dressing gowns, she was kind and funny and I liked her a lot. Once her kids grew up, she left the angry truck driver husband and went to live in a different, bigger, town by the sea.

Our mother, who was not very good at paying attention to small town talk, or because she was an outsider or intruder, found it hard to live in this town. It was here that Dad stopped going to church. I played sport and kept out of trouble. When other kids were out I was reluctantly at home with my parents. We lived there for five years. It was a hard, sad town. Terrible unspoken things happened. My classmate, at twelve, the boy who broke his lunch bag with his fist on my head everyday for half a year, shot and killed his visiting friend from the city with an air rifle. He was an only child and so we were encouraged to feel sorry for him. The incident was spoken of in hushed voices and we wondered what really happened. Before I was fourteen I visited the handsome boy from our class in Shenton Park Rehab Hospital, shaven head with scars, being fed by tubes and pushed around in a wheelchair. He had flipped his father's car in the house paddock and spent several hours in the upturned vehicle in the dark before his parents returned home to find him.

My friend and her sister, daughters of hippies with American accents, were critically injured by a prominent member of the community when he ran into them

drunk and driving home from the golf club. I am haunted by the memory of ten teenage boys, unchecked football players, bragging about having sex with the same fourteen-year-old girl on one night. The community was full of sad, horrific and haunting secrets. Unwatched boys died wrapped around trees being too drunk or stoned, driving too fast, being too invincible. A different classmate died before his twenty-first birthday, after a very hot New Years Day 'bong on', drink-a-thon cricket match, and another when he drove off the bitumen on a well-known road into a tree, coming home from the wood chop championship. With ropes and exhaust fumes, those who felt they didn't belong killed themselves in more obvious ways. The invitation to the school reunion had a list of all our classmates. A line was drawn through the names of those who had died. There seemed to be too many and as each list arrived from the different schools I went to it was the same.

Almost fifteen years ago I went back to see, to try to remember, and I saw my friend. Like her mother in fluffy slippers and dressing gown, she was in the middle of a 'busy bee' and making fresh sausage rolls. Her husband, a classmate from school, was 'down the coast' fishing with the rest of the beer keg from Saturday night. She was looking after the kids and cleaning, cross and laughing.

The boy from up the street, his hair still quite curly with touches of premature grey, was smiling at the cash register in the fruit mart. In her clean apron, his mother sat quietly behind him, looking up occasionally to greet any familiar faces, his children around her feet. Watching the kids in the shop, she would hand a sweet to any who looked like they might cause trouble. I could still hear the echo of her calling him, keeping him close, watching him, keeping him safe.

Large farming consortiums now fund the new long-term cash crop of truffles. Sometimes, when we return to Perth to visit my parents, we drive through on the way somewhere else. I watch through the window but usually we don't stop.

—BOURKE STREET

I continue along Bourke Street. Outside the dark gothic building of the Salvation Army Hostel sit more smokers on milk crates. Opposite in the newly opened coffee shop, downstairs in the former St Margaret's Hospital apartments named Henry, Ivy, Jasper and something else I can't remember, smartly dressed workers sip their morning coffee and work from their laptops casually glancing toward the late night

partygoers propping each other up, returning home. On one side, hostel residents and on the other, smart, young, business folk. The furry pollen from the plane trees along this street make just about everybody sneeze. A tall pockmarked skinny woman with lank, dirty, blonde hair is squeezing the blackheads or pimples on the face of her companion. Though I can't see closely she looks to have sharp, vicious, painted nails. He stands there, straight, slightly shorter than her, trusting, giving in to her attentions. Without warning she turns, teetering on her high heels leaves him, and walks off to greet a different friend further along the street. He is left behind waiting, their shared intimate moment exposed to the street. He looks around, his community fractured. The street is silent, the object of his attention and attachment disappoints, he mourns his loss, abandoned and exposed to the community of others.<sup>18</sup>

The people smoking outside the Salvation Army Hostel are arguing about something, something that happened, or should have happened. One of them approaches a homecoming partygoer and makes a request. There are unbalanced people walking forward and backward, falling over and holding each other, staggering. One looks like the shirtless man from Taylor Square, but pedestrians can blur here, semi-dressed partygoers, homeless drinkers combined with smartly dressed office workers. Occasionally, a weary partygoer is warmly greeted by an office worker with a loud welcoming shout, followed by raucous descriptions of the night's events, air kissing and exuberant hand gestures. The smokers call out—'oiy' or 'aye'—or shout curses at people passing, but for the most part each group stays within some kind of negotiated boundary, some privileged, private space. Interactions are contained to rehearsed requests for cigarettes and their similarly rehearsed replies, language dictated by relations of power and performed in community.

Not far from here is the Captain Cook Hotel. It is just after nine and the light reflects on Cook's bust atop the hotel that offers \$7 steaks and \$18 rooms. In the shadow of the doorway a different three agitated people are negotiating. Cook, the national icon, appears in many popular guises and documenting them has become something of a habit. He is looking festive in his Mardi Gras costume, a hang over from February, the white stone in contrast with the pink wig, like Mrs Ogden in her bowling uniform with purple tinted hair. Cook looks good in drag, almost benign.





Captain Cook Hotel, Moore Park Rd, Surry Hills  
(photograph: Jan Idle)

This pink interruption negotiates a different space for Cook in thinking about contact and haunted community.

Like the khaki man I have left on the other side of Taylor Square and the man near the fountain, Cook is in contemporary performative mode. For a short time a dialogue emerges between the many remembered pasts and the present. The pimp, the khaki man, the shirtless man, Cook in costume, I move through the community of negotiated differences in 'dissonance and chaos', 'a polymorphous field of intensities and forces'.<sup>19</sup>

If I walk back toward the city along Bourke Street, before the old Kinsella's Funeral Parlour, which is now a nightclub, four doors up from the chemist, is the Greek cake shop—Athena, where I buy biscuits from Beth. An old guy nicknamed Peg Leg used to sit near here in the entrance to the apartments holding his half-empty bottle in one hand and waving the other. He would admonish the children on

their way to school, warning them to listen to their parents and teachers. His younger, limping friend would sing the old Crown Street School chant when he saw the boys in their school uniforms.

‘Crownies, Crownies brave and bold, Crownies, oughta be dipped in gold.’

Around the corner is the Belgenny Cafe. This is where the young waitress calls me ‘sweetie’ and I collect my takeaway coffee on my walk to work. At least once a week I meet the ‘darlings’ here; an assorted group of women who have children or had children at the primary school. We have been going there for years, maybe seven or eight, and meet to swap stories, laughing about our weekly family disasters. When it is sunny we sit outside and are often asked for cigarettes, money or matches by the passers by in assorted states of dishevelment. These exchanges, too, follow a pattern of rehearsed language, ‘anonymous talk’; each one repeated on a different



Belgenny Café

(photograph: Asma, Belgenny Café)

day with a different passer-by, though the language is the same.<sup>20</sup> Last year my sister, visiting from London, was sitting with us in the sun. Answering a phone call she stood up and walked away when suddenly an unkempt man with hands raised rushed toward her, she stepped to move out of his path but his focus stayed on her. Interrupted, she screamed, turned and ran into the café. He followed, and as quickly as he had arrived he ran out and stalked off across the street. Through the entire event she negotiated her cup in her saucer and her phone to her ear.

—BOURKE STREET TO CENTRAL STATION

Walking down the hill, at the back of the Sydney Police Centre are a group of officers, looking, standing, waiting, menacing in uniform. They are strapped in by phones, radios, guns, batons and other police type paraphernalia, their youth weighed down by the responsibility of watching the street.

—SWIMMING

At the bottom of the hill I pass by the grand nineteenth-century structure of Central Railway Station. Just behind here is the public swimming pool where, last year on his twelfth birthday, my son was punched by a stranger. He had just begun to enter into his own world, self-assured, funny, entertaining; flirting with the edges of 'being good' or as we sometimes jokingly described him as 'being perfect'. He is likable and when he was ten his teacher told me he was the nicest boy she had ever taught. She had been teaching for over twenty years and because I am his mother, I chose to believe her. He was shocked by the punch and the intrusion.<sup>21</sup> The boy, who we later found out was called Cannon, shouted *gay fucker* and punched him twice on the chin and struck him on the head with a kickboard. He didn't retaliate much, just clipped him over the head with his open hand. The following day he showed me the small cut inside his mouth from the punch and a few days later he was sporting a yellow bruise on the side of his face. Boys here watching each other, stretching their manhood, marking and protecting their private-public space in a violent negotiation of difference in community, no *laying down of arms* here.

At the end of their swimming squad training a different group of boys mucked about in the shallow end of the pool. They looked about fifteen or sixteen,



Swimming lessons, 2007

(photograph: Jan Idle)

strong, broad-shouldered and well covered, not thin or sinewy like runners. Two of them were jostling each other and then the bigger of the two started to show off, pushing his friend under the water, again and again with only just enough time for the shorter boy to catch his breath, but not enough time to speak. Two younger, smaller boys were watching, laughing nervously, nearby. The stronger one kept up his game and the boy with his head under managed to keep his breath, just. Pulled up he would gasp and then be pushed back under. He didn't know how to win at this game. Their swimming coach wasn't really paying attention. He was looking away, joking, gossiping and flirting with the other swimming coach. I could feel myself losing air, wanting them to stop. I wondered if the coach condoned this—a physical pecking order of fear, negotiating and learning community.

On the other side of the pool my daughter and her friend were learning to swim. Practising kicking, diving, breathing. They would meet boys like these in their teenage years, boys whose idea of fun was to physically frighten and dominate.



Eventually the swimming coach called the training squad to attention and dismissed them. Breathing gently again, I observed the bigger boy collect his bag and walk out. The second boy left the pool and seemed to disappear. In 1967 boys flexed their territorial muscle in a similar way at the public swimming pool. They would hang out at the deep end, smoking, near the corner of the fence, slightly hidden from the supervising pool attendant. Observing the teenage girls, making them giggle nervously. And these boys were the same ones who hauled my drowned classmate from the bottom of the pool, dragging him to the edge, trying unsuccessfully to save him.

At a different twelve-year-old party in an ocean pool, a week or so after the punch, an aggressive adult lap swimmer threatened, 'if you jump on me I'll fucking strangle you, you fucking little punk', and grabbed one of the boys around the neck. A group of them had been jumping from a rock on the cliff into the water, testing him, disturbing his rhythm. They are unforgiven, boys moving closer to becoming men learning community. Gay fucker, fucking little punk, fucking slut—a language of community.

'A community that challenges, provokes, threatens, but also enlivens, is a community of disagreement, dissonance and resistance.'<sup>22</sup> Expelling the fantasy of the harmonious and homogenous community and never celebrated in the national myth of Australian identity these fragments of chaos make up part of smaller forgotten national narratives. On a slow news day some of these stories might be written in the tabloids, unruly youths, out of control, similar incidents might involve police car chases or assaults; the 'troublemakers' are identified as outside the 'community'. Mostly they are secret, hidden, silenced, the brutality unspoken, unremembered, looked over, but carried forward, felt, held in the body, the impossible fractures of negotiation and dissonance.

—CENTRAL STATION

My walk skirts along the country trains arrivals area at Central Station. There are few commuters here. Most people have luggage and crocheted blankets. Small children carry pillows and nearly all are sleepily waiting for taxis or relatives. Drivers, railway staff and travellers light cigarettes and chat, smoking, being-with and sharing community.



Country trains arrivals, 2007  
(photograph: Jan Idle)

Near the station, the warm winter sun has begun to hit the wooden seats in the park. A group of Aboriginal people are gathered, sitting on the bench. I notice them because usually the seat is in shadow and empty and so I must be late for work. One middle-aged man beckons me—‘Excuse me M’am.’ I don’t respond, my earlier interaction with the khaki man has made me wary of strangers today, there is a rising sensation in my gut. Anyway there is no way I can respond to being called M’am, even if it was shouted. I pass by, resistant to his call, unable to venture into contact as I have no wish to negotiate this public space. Then he calls—‘Hey sister.’ Everything changes. I am seduced by his words. Again I am at the centre, but this time I engage because I like being called sister, I feel accepted, not an intruder, the word calls me in, makes me belong—to him, to here. My enteric nervous system silenced for a moment, his language produces a sense of community in passing, hey sister, no longer the fucking slut. I cannot refuse his call of familiarity, but it is

'anonymous talk' I think cynically, it is Lingis's language, as we re-enact one of society's prescribed encounters. A performance haunted by the past and the fractured settler community. But instead I prefer Nancy—'we are abandoned to community: a gift to be renewed and communicated'. Hey sister, his language, his words, our contact fleeting, amicable and well rehearsed, we negotiate community, the man on the sunny bench, and the passer-by walking to work; and for me it is not only a financial interaction.

Near the bus terminus at Railway Square I cross the main road and go to work.

—

Jan Idle completed an MA Cultural Studies (UTS) in 2007 writing about community and walking. She works as project officer for the Listening Project (ARC, CRN) a collaborative project between Justine Lloyd (MQ), Tanja Dreher (UTS), Penny O'Donnell and Cate Thill (ND).

---

—ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Prudence Black, Katrina Schlunke and the anonymous readers for their insights and useful comments.

—NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, quoted by Linnell Secomb in 'Interrupting Mythic Community', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland and S. Sawhney, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Clash near Rushcutters Bay <<http://www.cbonline.org.au/index.cfm?pageId=36,89,23,15>>, accessed 23 October 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those who Have Nothing in Common*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1994, p. 29. 'The other comes as an intruder, and an authority into the order of nature that my thought has represented in obedience to its own imperative. But it is another imperative, contesting the imperative my thought has always obeyed.'



- <sup>5</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye, The Design and Social Life of Cities*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990, p. 127.
- <sup>6</sup> Sennett, p. 129.
- <sup>7</sup> Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2004, p. 36. Michael Gershon quoted in Wilson: 'The enteric nervous system is thus not a slave of the brain but a contrarian, independent spirit in the nervous organization of the body. It is a rebel, the only element of the peripheral nervous system that can elect not to do the bidding of the brain or spinal cord.'
- <sup>8</sup> Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*, Routledge, London, 1996.
- <sup>9</sup> Linnell Secomb, 'Fractured Community', *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 147.
- <sup>10</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments, Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, p. 50. Bauman describes being-aside each other in the street as when the Other 'flickers at the periphery of vision'. The people I pass will 'furnish the space through which I move'.
- <sup>11</sup> Nancy, p. 35.
- <sup>12</sup> Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*, Fremantle Art Centre Press, Fremantle WA, 1999. My writing has been influenced by Kim Scott's story of history and memory entwined into the present, the echoes of history impacting upon the everyday.
- <sup>13</sup> Hicks, quoted in Ray Parkin, *H.M. Bark Endeavour*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 191. Lieutenant Hicks sailed with Cook on the *Endeavour* voyage and 'laying down of arms' and 'speaking in an unknown tongue' come from his description of the initial contact with Indigenous warriors when Cook first landed at Botany Bay.
- <sup>14</sup> Sennett, quotes Arendt, *The Conscience of the Eye*, p. 135.
- <sup>15</sup> Bauman, p. 50.
- <sup>16</sup> Bauman, p. 49.
- <sup>17</sup> Linnell Secomb, 'Haunted Community' in Michael Strydom (ed.), *The Politics of Community*, Davies Group, Aurora USA, 2002, p. 131–50.
- <sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology*, trans. J. Strachey, Penguin, London, 1917, 1964, pp. 245, 253.
- <sup>19</sup> Secomb, 'Fractured Community', p. 147.
- <sup>20</sup> Alphonso Lingis, 'Cues, Watchwords, Passwords', in Michael Strydom (ed.), *The Politics of Community*, Davies Group, Aurora, USA, 2002, pp. 15–30.
- <sup>21</sup> Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, p. 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Secomb, 'Fractured Community', p. 147.