

*Body/Landscape Journals*  
& the Paradox of Belonging

## intimate **Australia**

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Early in *Body/Landscape Journals* Margaret Somerville poses the question '[h]ow do I represent myself and the landscape?'.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the heterogeneous textual topography that is *Body/Landscape Journals* she attempts to represent, indeed perform, her embodied relationship to place. As a historian, Somerville has collaborated with Aboriginal women to record their oral histories. These collaborative and intimate working processes have seemingly realigned Somerville's desires and writing practices toward Aboriginality. *Body/Landscape Journals* is an exploration and working through of her desire to write an embodied sense of belonging in Australia. Somerville suggests, citing Elizabeth Ferrier, that 'colonisation is primarily a spatial conquest and postcolonial transformations require new ways of understanding and representing ourselves in space'.<sup>2</sup> She advocates that to generate postcolonial cultures it is necessary to transform the representational terrain, which in turn might reconfigure subjectivity. Yet the genesis for *Body/Landscape Journals* is Somerville's discovery that she cannot bring her alternative body/landscape connections into representation.

As a text, *Body/Landscape Journals* attempts to generate a postcolonial writing practice that makes room for heterogeneous and multiple stories of belonging, but in so doing Somerville risks overwhelmingly her readers. The text presents readers with many discomforts that they must negotiate. Whilst she was in the early stages of a collaborative writing project with four Aboriginal women, in which she was recording their oral histories of their connection to place, Somerville suffered from what she calls 'a crisis of the body'.<sup>3</sup> *Body/Landscape Journals* emerges from this crisis, which bears, for this reader, an uncomfortable resemblance to hysteria. Her 'crisis of the body' is an elusive illness that Somerville barely names, other than to say that she was suffering from such severe exhaustion that she retreated from the world,

took to her bed and found it impossible to continue to write. The catalyst for her crisis was the realisation that the Aboriginal women possessed what she terms a 'body and body/place connection always already in the stories' and that she 'didn't know how to do it for [herself]'.<sup>4</sup> The Aboriginal women's dialogic style of storytelling embodies the particularity of each person, their social relations and their place of belonging, whilst Somerville recognises her writing style as generated from the pretence of academic neutrality and objectivity. Readers are confronted with a white, privileged, academic historian in crisis because marginalised Aboriginal women have something she desires. Somerville's crisis silences her and prevents her from continuing a project that offers the Aboriginal women a site from which to address broader Australia.

One of the practices of recovering from her illness was to keep a journal, which was the beginning of *Body/Landscape Journals*. However, in writing the particularity of her experiences and interpretations, Somerville is exposed to the unsettling and confronting problem that in generating a writing position for herself she risks marginalizing *other* stories and subsuming the Aboriginal women, with whom she has collaborated, into her desires. In her fear of displacing others' stories and attempting to generate a postcolonial writing practice, Somerville composes a hybrid text, which employs many different modes of writing: poetry, history, oral storytelling, theory and self-conscious journal entries. It is an awkward text that risks alienating its readers through over-exposing Somerville's personal experiences, affronting them by toying with appropriating Aboriginal epistemology and then retreating into academic objectivity. Somerville assembles such disparate texts and styles that the reader might become exhausted by her anxiety and lose sight of the very project of generating a postcolonial writing practice.

Fiona Probyn argues that central to Somerville's work is her acknowledgment of its complicity in epistemic violence that is associated with writing the voice of the other.<sup>5</sup> She suggests, following Spivak's formulation, that the knowledge of the subaltern is a product of imperialistic relations of power and that it is therefore impossible for the subaltern ever to speak for herself within the representational terrain that attempts to *know* her. Probyn asks 'what kind of violence can be done to settler writing in order to make it prick up its ears and listen to alternative ways of seeing/being/writing/telling stories?'<sup>6</sup> I would pose a counter question: is a violence being done to white writing when it has long been a form subject to textual renovations? To become postcolonial necessitates (amongst other things) a reconfiguring of the textual landscape, but to construe it as a violence maintains the masculinist aggression of colonialism. Indeed, to suggest that this is a sign of a white writer 'undoing their privilege as a loss' might offer the white writer moral sanctuary in the fragmented text, in which they can evade encounters with the other and otherness.<sup>7</sup> It is, however, as Probyn affirms, Somerville's dis-ease upon giving up her privileged position that marks the impact

of the other and otherness upon her self-knowledge. Her uncertainty opens her to new connections that might transform her seeking into an act of invention, which could move her beyond colonialism.

The Aboriginal women's embodied stories of belonging reveal to Somerville her disembodied writing practice. However, it is Somerville's *sickness* that discloses to her readers the effects marginalised knowledge has on transforming individual desires and praxis. Somerville's desire for an embodied writing practice emerges from her identification with the *other's* desire. Somerville's is a reactive desire; that is to say, her desires are transformed by and through her relationships with Aboriginal women. She no longer desires to struggle with white patriarchy over whose stories should dominate national narratives and become the nation's history, but rather to find a writing style that enables her to speak the particularity of herself without dispossessing or possessing the other. It is a liminal space in which one cannot represent otherness, but only perform the effect that otherness has upon the self. To do this she generates a shifting textual landscape and improvises a subject of writing who acts to clear a space in which she—the subject-in-crisis—can speak a place for herself to dwell, whilst leaving gaps for other voices and forms of inhabitation. *Body/Landscape Journals* positions the reading subject in a textual scene which interrupts the interpretative processes and demands that the reader encounter what dominant national narratives deny—the contingency of the self and one's historicity, and colonisation. In so doing, the text demands its interlocutors hear differently.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Somerville reveals to her readers that during this process she became unrecognisable to herself; in trying to bring body/land connection into representation, *she* gets lost.

Somerville envisions each chapter as a performance. The chapters are memory sites that she imaginatively re-enters in a process of re-writing formative events in her life from the shores of a future (becoming) self. Paradoxically, she attempts to arrest the past in her textual frame to offer herself a secure (enough) vantage point from which to infuse her memories with the complexity and plurality of living in a colonised country. Although each chapter is an exploration of a specific event or research project, Somerville annexes voices, critical theory, memories and seemingly random fragments into her text, so much so that the frame cannot hold the excess of her creative, intellectual play. At the close of the chapters she shifts to a new memory site, abandoning the time and place, but taking with her the questions that were raised in the previous chapter. These questions cause her to re-think her critical and writing practices. The narrator and narrative of *Body/Landscape Journals* are disordered by other voices and discourses. The writing subject and text are generated from intersubjective and intertextual exchanges.

Despite *Body/Landscape Journals* being a broken narrative it is constituted from Somerville's desires and creative, intellectual endeavours. The narrative is haunted and disrupted by both

the quiet voices of those marginalised by History and the boom of Western academics. She situates readers both spatially and temporally and (dis)orientates them with a plurality of images, ideas and voices. Her self-conscious, fragile narratorial tone gives the impression that she is almost incapable, and unwilling, to direct readers. To offer the reader an insight into Somerville's writing practice I will quote at some length.

We arrive at our campsite at Angatja and are swarmed by wild straw-haired kids chattering in harsh guttural voices. *Ngalya kati!* bring it here, they shout as swags are unloaded off the truck. I call back to them in their language and they fall about laughing at me. One bright skinny kid comes to help unpack, undoing toilet bag, putting on makeup, examining clothes and tape recorder. We exchange names; *Margaretta* she says, adding her own rhythms. No adult appears until Nganyinytja wanders into our camp, bare feet, flowered skirt, and cardigan wrapped close against a chill wind.

*Palya, Ngalya-pitjala nyawa ngayaku ngura*

Welcome, come and visit my country, she greets us.

Each day after that, she comes in the morning and again in the afternoon.

Nyanyinytja cradles the whole experience in her life story. This is what she gives to us and what she holds us in. She remembers as a small child wandering through the vast stretches of country to the west of Angatja towards the border of Western Australia with her mother and father, before white man came to her country. She tells us how they saw the first white men come to Angatja on camels from the top of the same hill where we are camped. Their mothers had hidden all the children in the rocks on the hill, terrified of what might happen to them when the white men on camels arrived.

Who is this small grey-haired woman who comes to us with white floured hands from making damper? I see her as a vision of the five black matriarchs from my work with Patsy Cohen on *Ingelba*; the embodiment of Mary Jane Cain of *The Sun Dancin'*, the woman who straddles two eras of history—the time before white settlement of this land and the time after. She moves between two worlds of such profound difference, and she gives her people the strength to move forward. *We gotta make it good for ourselves to go forward*, the people say.

How can I move across this space between Nganyinytja and me?<sup>9</sup>

Somerville situates her narratorial self in a dangerous gap. In attempting to bring Indigenous voices and knowledge into the public realm she risks appropriating them for her own purposes and enacting a neo-colonialism. Her voice and actions appear to be framed by Aboriginal women's stories, wisdoms, reflections, concerns and common sense, yet Aboriginal voices and histories are counter-framed within her theoretical musings and obsessions. It is a precarious and serious game that she is playing. She risks deploying Indigeneity to right (write) herself.<sup>10</sup> Somerville moves through experiences Aboriginal women have shared with

her and takes what she has gained into chapters that return her to her own solitude. However, the narrative method is motivated as much, if not more, by gaps in understanding and interpretative disjuncture, as by self-knowledge. Somerville's textual politics therefore give few answers, but beg several questions: how does one ethically engage with difference? what is the self and how might one re-write oneself to be open to otherness without synthesising it into the same? how does one live and write in a contested country?

— WRITING HOME: COMPOSING DESIRE & DECOMPOSING AUTHORITY

The reader enters *Body/Landscape Journals* through Somerville's detailed descriptions and affective responses to the landscape in which she takes her daily walk. Despite Somerville recognising that this place is 'decidedly tatty', not picturesque, and that there are other far more spectacular walks she could take, it is this ordinary space that she loves and calls 'home'.<sup>11</sup> She attends to this straggly place with a poetic eye, offering its beauty to the reader through her intimate, embodied connection, like a lover attending to her lover's body, and in so doing revealing to the reader that this place is a site of desire. Her belonging and inhabitation of this landscape are enmeshed in her desire for intimacy and union. Yet, as Somerville writes, this is a publicly accessible space, infinitely colonised by other land uses and narratives. Anybody can walk in this place she calls home and generate stories from it, which could make it unrecognisable and uninhabitable for her. Dominant narratives of place continually threaten her with dispossession.

It is this hybrid, publicly accessible place, Somerville argues, that is the focus of her question of belonging.<sup>12</sup> As she states, this 'place exists here in my performance of it. In telling the story of place it comes into being as a particular landscape evoked by a particular body, just as I come into being through that performance'.<sup>13</sup> Her body authors this place she calls home, and that body in turn is composed from the places in which it dwells. However, her belonging—her being at home in this place—is a matter of speech. Other bodies conceive of this landscape differently from Somerville and the site generates alternative subjectivities that, like her, imagine themselves to belong to this place and need to speak and perform their belonging. The difficulties of learning to represent oneself and one's place of belonging, which is necessary to one's learning to speak a space for oneself into being,<sup>14</sup> are compounded by places being inhabited by more than one subject—one body: an excess of narratives necessarily competes for a place for their speakers to inhabit and call home. It is the clash of disparate and heterogeneous performances and narratives of belonging that is Somerville's focus in her pursuit of a body/landscape connection.

Somerville's quest for and questioning of belonging is connected to a *passion* for the landscape.<sup>15</sup> She yearns for belonging and the text aches with an urgency to communicate her longing. She narrates two stories in an effort to inform her readers of the origins of her desire.

One is a family story that has deeply informed her work, but which she had never heard spoken until her sister narrates it to her as an adult. The story is of Wee Davy, a child from her grandfather's first marriage, whom he left behind with his family in Scotland when he and his second wife immigrated to Australia. He never informed his second wife of the child. When his second wife (Somerville's grandmother) returned to Scotland to give birth to their first child she 'discovered' Wee Davey and brought him back with her to Australia. As Somerville writes:

When she arrived with the boy, Papa was furious and there was 'trouble'. Wee Davy was placed in the Barnardos Homes, never to be heard of again. He was only three.

This story is a kind of promise of connection that is lost. It represents all the loss and, for me, a generational cycle of erasure and repression of connection to place. In Australia, there is a double displacement: no Celtic indigenous to return to and, as a third generation migrant, I still bear the burden of guilt for loss of indigenous here. So there is no choice, I have to flesh out a connection to place here because it is the only place I can; I have to make sense of that.<sup>16</sup>

This story positions Somerville, despite being a third generation Australian, as enacting a perpetual migration—forever in search of a homeland. The promise of Scotland as home is held captive in family stories that needed to remain a secret to allow her grandfather to begin afresh in the new world. Somerville's family's ability to settle in Australia, to have the right to call Australia home and to *name* Australia, is tied to the need to erase their, or to be more accurate, her grandfather's neglect of his social obligation—abandoning of his own child—which is replaced by the settler desire to 'start again'. Due to the burden of the white settler guilt she feels toward the dispossession of Indigenous people of Australia, she is *unable* to belong here. Notably, her sense of double displacement is shrouded in silence. Both the story of Wee Davey and narratives of the dispossession of Indigenous people cannot be spoken without unsettling the good name of the, predominately white, male settlers—that is, without disrupting the good name of the white family and the white nation.

In narrating the tale of Wee Davey, Somerville speaks a story with which many Australians identify—that is, of an infantile sense of loss and abandonment. They cannot return to the *motherland* of their *forefathers* and cannot fully identify with Australia as home because it lacks something that is promised in the migrant imaginary of the lost mother country—an imaginary site in which the desire for a pre-Oedipal plenitude is enacted and never resolved. She cannot speak as a citizen sovereign to Scotland, and due to her postcolonial politics her sovereignty in Australia is under question. Yet she yearns for a place to *call* home and to be at home in Australia. To imagine belonging as an infantile plenitude is dangerous. It connects one's desire for a home and sense of being at home with a place in which meaning goes

uncontested. Alterity becomes a direct threat to one's sovereignty because it interrupts and interferes with one's interpretation that belonging is without lack. Therefore, alterity must be subsumed, cast out or obliterated. One is then trapped in a form of claustrophobia, which prevents one from creatively participating in the remaking of oneself and the nation, and disallows any dialogue with difference, enclosing one in a dangerous monologue of belonging.<sup>17</sup> The desire for an uninterrupted connection to 'home' disables other voices and representations of place. To enable heterogeneity, and thus ethical cross-cultural engagement, she must quieten this unsatisfiable desire. Somerville's double displacement reveals a gap in conventional narratives of belonging and citizenship. She becomes trapped, oscillating between white settler guilt and a nostalgia for a 'foreign' homeland, alienating her from a social network. If she fails to devise a form of speech to represent her sense of belonging in Australia she will remain estranged from this country.

The other story that Somerville offers in order to explain her passion for landscape stands in stark contrast to the secret family history of Wee Davey. Before Somerville began her work as an oral historian, she lived with her family in the remote Aboriginal settlement of Papunya. She was not working, but had access to a government vehicle in which she would drive a group of older Pintubi women to their dancing grounds. The Pintubi women and Somerville would spend their days singing, dancing and doing ceremonies.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that she knew very little Pintubi and the Aboriginal women even less English, Somerville suggests that she felt deeply connected to the women and the country, and that the experiences she shared with the women transformed her life. She writes that after leaving the desert the 'image of the women dancing grew with me and asked many questions. The women were powerful, dignified and in command in their place in the landscape'.<sup>19</sup> Yet the Pintubi women are marginalised from mainstream Australian society and for this they suffer material impoverishment.

It is the disparate stories of Wee Davey, the longing for a home, and the Pintubi women's ritualistic enactment of their connection to their country, which help Somerville express the foundations of her 'passion for landscape' that has so greatly informed the path her life has taken. When Somerville returned to the east and began to work with Aboriginal women in Armidale, New South Wales, she noticed that the fact that these women did not have access to traditional ceremonial sites did not undermine their cultural strength. The image of the Pintubi women dancing in the desert returns to Somerville in her search for belonging because they narrate their sense of belonging through dance. Similarly, although the Aboriginal women of Armidale do not participate in traditional ceremonies, they perform their belonging through oral stories. These Aboriginal women, who are from vastly dissimilar areas of Australia and who enact their Aboriginality very differently, share the ability to *spea*k their belonging to their country. Although dancing, traditional ceremonies and oral histories might not be

recognised by mainstream society as legitimate forms of narrating one's belonging to the country, they enable the Aboriginal women to clear a space for themselves, within the din of hegemonic national stories, to perform their *being* in their country.

#### — WRITING IN GAPS BETWEEN DESIRE AND AUTHORITY

For Somerville the story of Wee Davey makes evident that there *'has always been a prior question for me of my place in this Australian landscape'*.<sup>20</sup> Her collaborative projects with Aboriginal women, in which she recorded their oral histories of their connection to their country, offered her the sense that she *'had been born in this landscape'*.<sup>21</sup> Both *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs*<sup>22</sup> and *The Sun Dancin'*<sup>23</sup> are oral histories generated from conversations shared in what became rich friendships, both individually and collectively, between Somerville and the Aboriginal women. However, when Somerville and Patsy Cohen were promoting their book *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* at the Perth Writer's festival, Somerville became *'painfully aware of the separation that the academic voice entailed and decided that it was not where I wanted to be located in the landscape of these stories'*.<sup>24</sup> In their working relationship, Somerville and Cohen, a local Armidale Aboriginal woman, had established a dialogue and mode of speech which enabled each to speak, in their own terms, of their embodied connection to the land, and therefore to make themselves visible in their privately spoken landscape.<sup>25</sup> However, this mode of speech did not translate onto the page, and this failure led Somerville, in her next collaborative project, *The Sun Dancin'*, to endeavour to change her writing practice by generating a multiple voiced subject of writing.

Somerville recognised that the academic voice was just one of the many possible voices that she could include in her writing. She became committed to multi-voiced texts, which include many different Aboriginal voices and oral stories, and *'strive for the inclusion of different "I's" in the text'*.<sup>26</sup> *The Sun Dancin'* is a collaborative project in which Somerville recorded the stories of four Aboriginal, Kamilaroi, women (Marie Dundas, May Mead, Janet Robinson and Maureen Sulter) concerning the significance to them and their community of Burrabeedee, a site fifteen kilometres from Coonabarabran, western New South Wales. During the process, it became clear to Somerville that the Kamilaroi women were aware that, according to mainstream Australia, they were people without a culture, as they have *'no "dreamtime"'* and do not conform to the established Western representations of what constitutes Aboriginality. As Somerville states, however, the women were also cognisant of the *'complexities of the relationship between their oral stories and the written discourses that constitute Aboriginal people and impinge on their storytelling'*.<sup>27</sup> Somerville insists that the women were adamant that she had the *'absolute authority in telling their story'* and that her role was to be the *'pencil'* and theirs to be the *'mouth'*.<sup>28</sup> They gave control to Somerville to construct the written text from their oral stories. Somerville claims that an interdependent



relationship developed between her and the women over the 'representation of their oral stories as written text',<sup>29</sup> and this relationship developed from conversations and negotiations about the book.

The collaborative process that Somerville and the women establish enables Somerville to have multiple voices in the text. Her multiple voices, however, remain restrained by the academy, which offers her a disciplinary integrity, but not an embodied presence. Notably, in Somerville's representation of the dialogic collaborative process that was established during *The Sun Dancin'* project, she deploys her academic authority to translate for her readers Maureen Sulter's cynicism about mainstream Australia's expectations of what constitutes Aboriginal stories. When Somerville asks the women how they would like their stories represented Maureen responds jokingly, 'Say "Long long ago in the dreamtime", eh (laughing)'.<sup>30</sup> Somerville interprets Maureen's joke. She writes that Maureen's

ironic reference to the way (traditional) Aboriginal stories are told reveals some of the complexities of the relationship between their oral stories and the written discourse that constitute Aboriginal people and impinged on our storytelling.<sup>31</sup>

Somerville makes it clear that Maureen is well aware of the limitations that colonialist representations of Aboriginal people impose on her ability to establish a speaking position that is representative of her own experiences. However, Somerville imposes a textual authority upon Maureen's orality. As Michele Grossman argues, Aboriginal writing 'continues to be defined as one version of the final frontier of Indigenous participation in the colonising culture'.<sup>32</sup> She suggests that this 'final frontier' is the division between, on the one hand, text and textuality and, on the other hand, story and orality. Grossman maintains that white collaborators and editors insist on managing the relationship between Aboriginal people and writing, and that this suggests that 'true' Aboriginal subjectivity lies elsewhere and is compromised by its 'imbrication with Western technologies'.<sup>33</sup> This has resulted in white editors and writers controlling the textual production of collaborative writing, and this maintains the distinction between white *writing* and Aboriginal *talking*. Grossman contends that '*contemporary* Aboriginal culture [is represented] as a landscape fundamentally unmarked by, and unconcerned with, texts and textuality'.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, Somerville is the writer and producer of textuality, and hence the marker of modernity, and the Aboriginal women are 'raw' experience and orality. I would agree with Grossman that Aboriginal writing and culture are still too often denied inter-textuality, but this cannot be said to apply to all cross-cultural collaborations. Each collaborative process is highly individual and complex.

As Somerville writes, in both her collaborative projects with Aboriginal women it was the women themselves who insisted that she was the writer.<sup>35</sup> In the writing of *The Sun Dancin'*, however, Somerville begins to experience her textual authority as disabling her from

representing her affective, dialogic relationship with the Aboriginal women and her own embodied relationship to the country. In her own words, Somerville fails to be able to 'represent myself and the landscape' that she shares with the Aboriginal women.<sup>36</sup> Although Grossman's assessment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaborative projects reduces the complexity and variety of relationships, it is helpful for an analysis of Somerville's crisis. Grossman insists that too often the textual strategy in the production of collaborative work reproduces a politics of restraint, control and containment, reflecting a wider 'material politics of Aboriginal "boundedness" within an oppressive political and cultural environment'.<sup>37</sup> This tendency in the editing and collaborative process, Grossman argues, rehearses ambivalences and anxieties that characteristically mark the colonial impulse in its treatment of the other.<sup>38</sup> The white writer or editor, like the colonial subject, fears becoming entrapped in another's desires and experiences. Entanglement in another's experiences disorders one's ability to name and know oneself, hence induces a loss of sovereignty over the self. To maintain one's self-authority the white writer or editor imposes a textual authority which excludes Aboriginal agency. Grossman associates this white textual authority with the forestalling of the colonial anxiety of the threat of entrapment by the colonial other. She contends:

This escape from an implied threat of entrapment by the text of the 'other' rehearses a key element in imperial discourse: the best frontiersman, after all, is not the one who penetrates furthest into the wilderness, but the one who emerges most intact and unscathed to tell the tale.<sup>39</sup>

In her collaborative work, textual competence enables Somerville to fabricate a sovereign writing subject, but at the expense of bringing her empathetic relationship with the Aboriginal women into representation. However, Somerville's 'sickening' response to her inability to write her body/landscape connection indicates that the politics of restraint, control and containment of Aboriginal voices have entrapped her.

Somerville's work and friendships with Aboriginal women have caused her to reformulate her notions of belonging. However, in mainstream—or perhaps more accurately white—Australia, the understandings of sovereignty have remained dominated by notions of uniformity, control and the management of strict boundaries between oneself and the other(ness). Her relationships with Aboriginal women have reconfigured Somerville's desire and therefore transformed her subjectivity. Somerville's crisis indicates that she fears a loss of authority and respect from the academy if the body/landscape connection that she *feels* marks her academic writing. Her crisis also reveals that she desires the recognition of the academy. Furthermore, it is a recognition that offers her a form of self-recognition. In writing of her 'crisis of the body', Somerville says that she had 'fallen into the abyss of Western dualistic thinking predicated on separation rather than connection'.<sup>40</sup> She indicates that it is this

separation of the mind/body that connects her to Western reason and the academy and which enables her to take up a privileged speaking position. The gap that she has fallen into is the space between her desires—the desire for (and to write) an embodied presence in the Australian landscape, which she argues will enable empathy with Aboriginal people's dispossession,<sup>41</sup> and the desire to retain dominant cultural recognition. For Somerville returning intact from forays on the other side of the frontier might offer her a form of sovereignty, but not a sense of belonging, indicating that the colonial anxiety of entrapment is still pervasive.

Somerville suggests that she has felt dominated and restrained by masculinist, normalised thinking, yet fears abandoning the comforts and certainty of academic authority for the liminal. For those who have felt dominated by another's reason, to willingly situate one's self within a liminal space is precarious. There is the fear of being reterritorialised: that one's fragile images and words might evaporate in the presence of already well constituted language and ideas.<sup>42</sup> As many feminist theorists have argued, in Western culture women represent both the limit and place of philosophy.<sup>43</sup> The image of woman has served as the ground from which the body politic is born, the Nature from which culture emerges but separates itself to be the rational, independent, unified representative of civilisation. This forfeit of nature or corporeality gives the subject the right to be author or agent of the body politic—the right to write modernity. Both corporeality and the specificity of individuals are repressed so that the body politic maintains the fantasy of speaking in one voice and being independent from nature, or the maternal body. The material body creates disorder, which cannot be incorporated into the body politic: it disables the rational subject. It is imagined that those who cannot act independently of their corporeality, their nature—those who cannot separate themselves from being enmeshed or entrapped within another's desire or force—are subject to being dominated by sympathy toward another body, rather than the body politic—the nation. As Somerville writes, citing Barbara Holloway, '*How, then, are women to relate to place if they are the maternal and if they are also the envelope/limit?*'<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Somerville understands herself as 'bear[ing] the burden of guilt for the loss of indigenous here',<sup>45</sup> indicating that she is entrapped within a matrix of silence—white settler guilt, fear of abandonment, and being a woman. Her initial response to this deafening silence is to collapse, to fold within herself and lose all sense of agency and vitality.

To work through her crisis she re-enters memory sites to write-in and expose herself to her uncertainty and embodied practices. She reconfigures her representational terrain by introducing the poetic into the theoretical. Somerville attempts to create—perform—a post-colonial feminist, perhaps even anti-colonial, writing practice, which speaks the gap between her desires as a space of plenitude, rather than lack. She asserts style as politics, whereby the resistance to colonising discourses might begin to emerge within a poetics which returns

ambivalence and intersubjectivity to texts, recognising that writing the self has always been a matter of negotiation.<sup>46</sup> Somerville devises an alternative writing practice in an attempt not only to bring her new self into speech, but to bring a new self into being, whereby identity can be predicated on connection, rather than separation. In so doing, she resists the recuperative gesture to assimilate otherness to consolidate her own status.<sup>47</sup>

To generate a writing voice that is constituted from and representative of one's entanglement in otherness, rather than fabricate a writing subject predicated on separateness, Somerville retreats not only from the world, but also from well constituted discourses. She states that when she 'began what became the *Body/Landscape Journals* the purpose was to revisit the people, places and stories of my work to explore the notion of bodily presence'.<sup>48</sup> She revisits through a process of remembering. She returns to her own texts and memories as a guest,<sup>49</sup> not assuming the authority to determine meaning, but rather in a re-reading process in which she remakes herself. The autobiographical 'I' is never more than a paper 'I',<sup>50</sup> and one is always creating the self. In the course of exposing this, Somerville reveals herself as a production. Somerville remembers as a process of investigating the production of herself and how the self can be re-imagined; therefore she suggests that one can reconstitute the self, not in the sense of a liberal ethics of progress and individualism, but rather by deploying memory to reinterpret the text of one's life to generate a new ethics of engagement.

— (UN)KNOWING, RE-CONNECTING AND MAKING A PLACE FOR MYSELF AMONGST OTHERNESS

As I have discussed elsewhere, when Somerville was working with Patsy Cohen on *Ingelba* she met an elderly Aboriginal woman, Emily, with whom she remained friends until Emily's death.<sup>51</sup> Emily had asked Somerville to help her gain access to a privately owned station so she might visit the burial site of the Old Queen, an important Aboriginal Elder. After many delays they finally visit the site. Emily pokes around in the grass with her walking stick to locate the graves and says '[t]he graves have not been swept clean',<sup>52</sup> but offers Somerville no more information on the importance of the Old Queen to her. Somerville writes:

I visit that space over and over and know there is a profound connection between Emily's performance on top of the mountain and my ability to perform myself at this point; to make sense of my bodily experience in space, to story it for myself and at the same time for you, my reader.<sup>53</sup>

Somerville shares with the reader her empathy with Emily's dispossession from her country, which is represented by her quiet protest that the 'graves have not been swept clean'.<sup>54</sup> Somerville, the historian, does not know how to interpret Emily's performance. She does not have access to the importance of the Old Queen to Emily, yet it is to this scene that she repeatedly returns in her attempt to create paths out of her 'crisis of the body'.

Although Emily's performance is culturally and gender specific it is also particular to her. Emily asks Somerville to take her to the gravesite not as a representative of her community but as an individual. Other members of Emily's community highly value the Old Queen, but Emily's performance is a deeply personal enactment of her cultural specificity. Somerville's inclusion of this scene renders Emily not *just* an Aboriginal, who represents all Aboriginal women or people, but a complex, self-reflexive subject, with desires and experiences particular to herself—something which too often goes unrecognised in representations of Aboriginal people. Emily's performance is not relegated to an essentialist, traditional position, so often imposed on Aboriginal people. Rather Emily is textually reproducing or, in this case, creating a text that draws from her history, and may or may not be the same as that of other Aboriginal people. It is intertwined with and reliant on a multiplicity of histories—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Emily asserts her identity as intersubjective but particular to herself and in so doing affirms her differences from Somerville and from Somerville's desires for a sense of belonging in her country.

Emily's refusal to translate her performance for Somerville prevents Somerville from assimilating Emily's experiences into her own. However, it instigates within Somerville a desire to know why Emily's *play* makes such an impact on her. The specificity of Emily's materiality estranges her from Somerville, but they share an (un)common desire to articulate their belonging to this country. Their desires impact on one another in a way that exposes a space in which they might make contact with one *another*. Emily's refusal to limit her complex relationship with her country to a 'rational' exchange preserves the differences between them. She nonetheless demands to be recognised, affirming that belonging and identity are the outcome of negotiation—'a balancing act, a process of inventing the self in relation to the other'.<sup>55</sup> In so doing, a space is opened up between 'I' and the other—a potentially socialising site in which exchange can occur and something new begin.

Emily commands that her particular relationship to the burial site be recognised, yet refuses to bring it within the limits of Western reason. In the chapter that sits between the 'Pine Gap Women's Peace Camp' and 'Emily and the Queen' Somerville explores the lessons she learnt from a Pitjantjatjara woman, Nganyinytja, who co-runs an 'ecotourist enterprise to introduce white people to her country',<sup>56</sup> and who also insists on being recognised in her own terms. Nganyinytja maintains that her people possess the knowledge that makes the country strong and makes it grow and that if this can be passed on to white people then the 'land and its people will be healed'.<sup>57</sup> However, Nganyinytja, like Emily, refuses to translate her knowledge into a form that non-Aboriginal people can easily assimilate. Somerville ponders Nganyinytja's refusal to speak English, despite the fact that she learnt it as a child and taught it to other Anangu children. As Somerville writes,

She has participated in countless discussions and meetings over the years with Government officials, lawyers, other Aboriginal people over land, and rights, and so on, and always carries out these negotiations in Pitjantjatjara with an interpreter/translator.<sup>58</sup>

Somerville says that she realised that 'translation/interpretation is an inevitable and fundamental component of her [Nganyinytja's] vision',<sup>59</sup> which is to pass her people's knowledge onto white people, whilst maintaining the integrity of her stories. Nganyinytja's insistence on her stories being translated by another, rather than speaking English herself, confronts the listener with the too often forgotten understanding that all dialogue is a (failed) process of translation. Furthermore, Nganyinytja's insistence that her 'traditional' knowledge be mediated through a translator (at times an obviously fraught process) commands her interlocutor to acknowledge that they cannot have unmediated access to her difference, and that all cross-cultural exchanges occur within a liminal space: an in-between space in which nobody is sovereign and which is the property of no one.

Somerville's sense of belonging becomes unmoored from, and *by*, Aboriginal women. They cannot provide her with belonging. This results in her turning back and bearing witness to the construction of *herself*. In an attempt to release herself from her 'crisis' Somerville unsettles her own privileged knowledge system and forms of representation. She attempts to 'write her body', that is to write in a style which attempts to speak the space between the body and language. In so doing, she attempts to reformulate language and knowledge to give form to the particularity of her experiences as an embodied subject. Her reformulations push up against the limits of the Australian cultural imaginary; a cultural imaginary that relies on silence and repression of colonial violence to maintain the fantasy of white sovereignty. Somerville begins to explore this in-between space, which recognises the contingency of herself and the other, by keeping a journal of images that occurred to her during massages. She claims that the 'journal writing was reluctant and spasmodic' and the images that came to her during massages were not easily representable as she had to bring herself out of a 'deep trance-like consciousness to cross over the bridge between semiotic and symbolic ...'.<sup>60</sup> Somerville is influenced by Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic and Grosz's reading of Kristeva's work. As Grosz asserts, the

semiotic is understood by Kristeva as pre-oedipal, maternal space and energy subordinated to the law-like functioning of the symbolic but, at times, breaching the boundaries of the symbolic in privileged moments of social transgression.<sup>61</sup>

The release of the semiotic into the symbolic introduces an indeterminate articulation into language, which disrupts the authority of the unified ego. It injects into discourse the

impossibility of interpretative certainty that is an element of all languages and that the symbolic attempts to halt in order to maintain meaning and naturalise the social codes. Accordingly, Somerville's language pushes up against the limits of meaning, introducing the poetic into the symbolic order, disrupting the authority of Western representation and privileging alternative knowledges and constructions of subjectivity.

The subject is irremediably split between their conscious and unconscious self, therefore the subject is radically unable to know its *self*. As Kristeva argues, the 'traditional linguistic, literary and social theory is based on an unrecognised commitment to a concept of the speaking subject',<sup>62</sup> which privileges particular identities and marginalises others and otherness. She contends that if women are to overcome containment within patriarchal representations, then different ways of knowing, different kinds of discourse and new formations of language and knowledge need to be explored.<sup>63</sup> I would add to this that, as Somerville learns through her friendships with Nganyinytja and Emily, if we are to overcome colonial representations then we need to acknowledge that stories exist within discourses of power, and to improvise new ways of writing, which do not privilege a particular speaking subject, constituted from the (fantasy) stable, white body.

Somerville's writing style privileges the semiotic. In so doing, it privileges the poetic function, that which escapes interpretation and hence questions the unified subject, questioning the legitimacy of the insistence of the transcendental ego and normative social codes. Somerville re-enters former interpretive sites to return to them the uncertainty and indeterminacy of cross-cultural engagements. She recognises them as sites of contact and possible exchange between the undecidable processes of sense and non-sense; not places that secure her desire for personal sovereignty and uninterrupted belonging.

#### — THE IMMENSE IN THE INTIMATE

In the chapter 'la mer/la mere' Somerville re-enters the site of former research on Mission Beach. She wants to take up Grosz's challenge to 'put the body at the centre of theorising ... and work with her ideas about the space between language and the body'<sup>64</sup> in an attempt to reconfigure her body/landscape connection. In this chapter Somerville weaves her way between disparate memories: her mother, the cassowary project, her childhood, dreams, theory/theorising, images of the landscape, herself in the landscape, 'stories' of science and diary entries from her time spent at Mullaway Beach where she retreated to write this chapter. She leads the readers into the chapter with the sense that she is a creature who inhabits an intertidal zone:

We are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves ...  
More or less wavily sea, earth, sky—what matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all.<sup>65</sup>

In the beginning there were no words  
only the salt water lap lapping at the edge of the sea.

I begin slowly, with rhythms of coming in and drawing away, to have words of my own as I move between shed and water, always drawn back to the water's edge. I am there at dawn, in the heat of the day, at dusk and in the night as I watch the tides grow larger with the pull of the moon towards the summer equinox. At low tide all the creatures who inhabit this intertidal zone with me are stranded on rocks bared to the sun, and at the highest tides the waves cover the rocks where I sit. I am fascinated by all the creatures that live on these margins, opportunists who wait for passing trade.<sup>66</sup>

She is attempting to bring into speech disparate experiences, which might initially be understood as a form of nonsense, but that allow her to begin the process of composing an embodied subject of writing. Writing her body enables Somerville to speak of the heterogeneity of her body and the contingency of her identity, and to reconfigure the representational terrain and make room for otherness.

Somerville establishes an endurable zone in which to confront her own limitations through a process of retreat. She asks, 'What is the most basic level of inhabiting?'<sup>67</sup>, and answers this in part through Bachelard, 'All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home'.<sup>68</sup> As Somerville posits, the home is synonymous with the maternal,<sup>69</sup> a place protected from life's contingencies, a site in which one does not have to endure the anxiety of separation and question who am I. Somerville performs a form of retreat to enable her to expose her self to her contingencies—a form of retreat which allows her a space for self reflection, without the eyes (I's) of the world upon her, whereby as a woman she can inhabit her body as her own, without having to perform the necessity of woman as home/limit. Furthermore, she can investigate her own images without having to curtail them under a more dominant discourse and thereby, once again, feel subsumed and invisible.

Somerville suggests that the paradox of belonging is that it is at once an act of intimacy, and yet, also a matter of speech through which one inserts one's self into social narratives. She needs to retreat during the time of writing this text so that she might be able to improvise a style of writing, which speaks of her own body/landscape connection, yet she bares this intimate process for public scrutiny, and in so doing risks it being subsumed into dominant discourses.

From her self-imposed exile Somerville ponders the manner in which the 'function of inhabiting throws into high relief the process of this writing. I have to return again and again to the performance of inhabiting'.<sup>70</sup> She takes up Bachelard's idea of the intimate immense, which she explains as a very simple notion in which 'immensity derives from the intimate, that it is an intensity of the intimate and I understand the intimate as the maternal space, no longer passive being but a positive space of doing, the act of inhabiting'.<sup>71</sup> Bachelard suggests



that the immensity in ourselves can be understood as an expansion of being, which is curbed by life (and, I would argue, the need for identity).<sup>72</sup> Somerville learns from Emily, Nganyintja and the Aboriginal women with whom she collaborates that belonging is an ongoing performance and act of speech. Like subjectivity, it is a process. The process of inhabiting, as a form of belonging, is established by inserting oneself into a landscape of stories. Emily deploys her imagination to enable her to inhabit the colonised space that is her country, without being colonised by or needing to colonise it. She explores the particularity of her own life to create points at which she can insert herself into social narratives, thereby creating a space for herself to dwell. As Carter affirms, 'to inhabit this dwelling, it is necessary to sit down outside it—just as the soul must pass out of the body and pass to the other side of the body if there is to be conversation'.<sup>73</sup> Belonging is a form of conversation, which relies on allowing the outside in and the inside out.

In *Body/Landscape Journals* Somerville traces the conflict between her white settler desire for belonging, which seemingly necessitates a stable identity, and a transformed sense of belonging that is informed by her relationships with the Aboriginal women with whom she has collaborated. Her collaborative working relationship with the Aboriginal women exposed her to alternative forms of belonging and identity, which she came to identify with and which therefore impacted upon her imaginary engagement with Australia. Initially, working as a writer and collaborator with Aboriginal women enabled Somerville to have both a sense of being 'born in [their] landscape',<sup>74</sup> whilst maintaining a frontier imaginary. Somerville's imagination appears, dangerously, free to wander without restraint. As Heather Kerr states, the 'mobile imaginative gaze constructs for itself a 'kind of property' with none of the responsibility of ownership, no obligation to settle or enclose'.<sup>75</sup> This is disruptive of the imperialist imaginary in which the imagination, like the land, is restricted and enclosed within a utilitarian mode of engagement. The imagination is the property of the state to be deployed for colonial expansion. However, Somerville's nomadic imagination, which resists confinement by the hegemonic power, in its own turn risks rehearsing a frontier imaginary by deploying the other in the service of her unlimited desires. The imagination thereby returns both the land and Indigenous people to the property of the Western subject to play out their fantasy of endless renewal.

Somerville's initial sickness is a form of hysteria in which she has assumed the place of the repressed. Somerville's sickness could be understood to result from the fear of being consumed by indeterminacy and hence being 'set adrift like an insane discourse'.<sup>76</sup> During her recovery from her 'crisis' Somerville experiences 'an excess' of language: 'there is such a proliferation of ideas coming from, and going in, all directions at once, a spilling, an excess that I can no longer write it all down. It's like being on the edge ...'.<sup>77</sup> She fears she is going mad but wants to explore this 'undefined space of connection between self and m/other ...'.<sup>78</sup>

in an attempt to disrupt the dominant narratives of belonging; the fantasy of an enclosed space of infantile plenitude. In so doing, she risks romanticising otherness and effacing difference. However, as Kristeva maintains, it is only by facing these risks that the social assemblage can be questioned: even if modes of production are transformed, no change can be sustained without being accompanied by major upheavals in representation.<sup>79</sup> A possible avoidance of these pitfalls is a movement between the semiotic and the symbolic, a self-reflexive recognition of the conditions of one's speaking position and the poetic pushing up against the limitations of discourse, exposing its contradictions and hence the heterogeneity of language and therefore oneself. Inserting the poetic into 'serious' theoretical writing not only blurs the borders between poetry, fiction and knowledge,<sup>80</sup> but also recognises the place of the imagination in enabling us to envision how our selves are enmeshed and defined by one *another* and to reimagine other possibilities of articulating self and other. In attempting to recognise and write with these impossibilities, a stumbling, stuttering, new form of writing emerges.

The relationship in Australia between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is intersubjective. As Marcia Langton so famously argues, "Aboriginality" only has meaning when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects'.<sup>81</sup> We are essential to one another, as our identity formation is complicatedly entangled in our (un)common histories and differences, and hence our storying of the country is enmeshed in these dynamics. Australia is an intimate space: and whether we recognise it or not, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are complicatedly embroiled in one another's lives. Even if many non-Aboriginal people might not recognise themselves as sharing a community with Aboriginal people, we all live in the shadow of colonialism. *Body/Landscape Journals* is a mode of writing which makes explicit the conditions of the post-colony. Somerville recognises the spectre of colonialism and the effects this has on our daily lives and on how 'we' inhabit this country. She sees the necessity of acknowledging this to enable a postcolonial country to emerge. Within our daily inhabitations, our everydayness, we establish the reality of our lives. Her writing bears witness to the particularity of *herself*, of how she is constructed by and negotiates the continuance of colonial power relations, and how she is produced by and creates *herself* in response to those who share her world. Her movement between daily forms of inhabitation and theoretical explorations is the beginning of a rewriting of colonial spatial practices, which practises a contemporary ethics of speech and opens up a space for oneself and the other to dwell. *Body/Landscape Journals* posits that belonging is a process of inserting oneself into social narratives, narratives that are endlessly open to re-invention and otherness, whilst respecting difference.

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26. Somerville, *Body/Landscape Journals*, p. 10.
27. See Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up To the White Woman*, p. 75. She argues that 'white middle-class women anthropologists' representations create a binary opposition of "traditional" versus "contemporary" Indigenous women which privileges certain groups of Indigenous women as culturally and racially authentic and positions the rest as racially and culturally contaminated'.
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