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IS ANY BODY HOME?

REWRITING THE CRISIS OF BELONGING IN MARGARET SOMERVILLE'S *BODY/LANDSCAPE JOURNALS*

Whilst attempting to write a paper about relationships to place, Margaret Somerville suffered from what she calls 'a crisis of the body.'¹ 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. She says of the project:

The women *gave me* multiple selves, the different I's *I want* in the text: the pencil as opposed to the mouth, archaeologist, historian, oral historian, and so on, but the new question was how to write a bodily presence? (p.11, italics added)

She goes on to say that she 'sensed the body and body/place connection always already in the stories but didn't know how to do it for me' (p.12). Do the stories that she speaks of *belong* to the Aboriginal women she is collaborating with? Is the seeming impossibility of Somerville having a bodily presence in the stories because she is attempting to have a bodily presence in the *landscape* of somebody *else's* belonging? Is it the fear of being a neo-coloniser that brings on Somerville's 'crisis of the body', this elusive illness that Somerville barely names other than to say that she was suffering from such severe exhaustion that she 'couldn't walk from the bedroom to the kitchen' (p.12)? One of the practices of recovering from her illness was to keep a journal, which was the beginning of her latest book *Body/Landscape Journals*, a text in which she investigates her 'sickening' response to her desire for a bodily presence in her writing.

Body/Landscape Journals is a hybrid text in which Somerville employs many different modes of writing: poetry, history, oral storytelling, theory and self-conscious journal entries. It is an attempt to establish new practices of writing that open up new relationships to place/space and present belonging as an event, a performance. It destabilises the binaries of true/false, fact/fiction and past/present by situating

itself along their fault lines. It is an awkward text that appears to be caught out mid-way through its emergence, a risk-filled adventure that gambles with the appropriation of Aboriginal epistemology and a retreat into the comfort of academic 'objectivity'.² Working from the interstices, the fault line of her white settler anxiety of belonging, has sickening repercussions for Somerville. However, she writes out of this position of 'unhealth' as a site from which to question and rearticulate western understanding of the body/landscape connection. It is for these reasons that I believe *Body/Landscape Journals* is an important intervention in the uneasy relationship between feminism and postcolonialism. Somerville's 'crisis of the body' highlights the *impossibility* of her position as a white woman in search of a sense of belonging in the Australian landscape. Feminism has embraced the body as a productive site, but for a feminist postcolonial transformation to occur the land also needs to be understood as dynamic.

How does the reader enter a text like *Body/Landscape Journals* without imposing upon it what it is not only resisting but also unsettling: Western knowledge? In *negotiations*, Deleuze suggests that analysis 'in terms of movements, vectors, is blocked.'³ He compares forms of analysis to new sports such as surfing, in which the concept of movement has changed. The surfers are not the source of movement but rather they:

take the form of entering into an existing wave...The key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to 'get into something' instead of being the origin of an effort.⁴

It seems that what Somerville wants is not so much to interpret the world as inhabit it, and with Somerville's text and a variety of theorists as my guides, or what Deleuze calls mediators, I want to be taken up in the motion that she (they) have created. Somerville, in being taken up in the motion of the Aboriginal women she is collaborating with, seems to herself to be falsified by their truth. That is to say, from watching, working and writing with these women, Somerville's bodily presence is revealed to her as insubstantial, which results in her 'crisis of the body'. This in turn leads her to find mediators so she can respond to this crisis. Mediators might be people, the imaginary, or even things in our environment that not only falsify us but also allow us to express *ourselves*. Without them *I*—the reader, interpreter—am lost.

I join Somerville late in the text as she retells an Aboriginal creation story of the Artunyi constellation or what to the West is known as the Pleiades. The European story of the constellation is of transcendence and romantic love while the Aboriginal story tells of a serpent that

eats a whole camp of *Yuras*, amongst which is a group of women called *Artunyi*. During a big storm the serpent drowns and then floats to the surface, where his body rots and bursts, blowing the *Artunyi* into the sky, where they have remained. Somerville comments that it is a story of 'corporeality, sexuality and the cycles of the earth...Another story of creation from the abject body' (216). I am drawn to the image of bodies, bodies of ideas, being blown into the sky. I want to attempt to inhabit the text, that is, work with the momentum that Somerville has created to attempt to investigate the *work* that *Body/Landscape Journals* is doing in contemporary Australian writing and thinking—the questions and problems that this text is posing. In this analysis I intend to form a constellation of ideas that I view through mediators that allow me to speak about belonging in the framework of post-colonialism and feminism.

*

One's own story is interesting in that it has something to do with a life that 'passes through' the individual: we are all collective beings.⁵

John Marks asks, '[w]hat does it mean to speak in one's own name?'⁶ I answer this in part through the words of Elspeth Probyn, 'the autobiographical must be made to work as an articulation between epistemological and ontological levels.'⁷ In this essay I would like to trace Somerville's attempt to create and perform, a postcolonial feminist, perhaps even anti-colonial, writing practice, which acts as an articulation between epistemological and ontological levels—that is, to catch Somerville writing a *self* that explores how Western epistemology has produced *herself* and to investigate the extent to which she may be attempting to respond to contemporary problems through old modes of being. The anxiety of belonging that Somerville is investigating might become a productive site upon which to establish, as Deleuze suggests, well formed questions.⁸

Becoming isn't a part of history; history amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become', that is, to create something new...[People's] only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is intolerable.⁹⁵

Body/Landscape Journals begins with Somerville re-entering her memory landscape of the Pine Gap Women's Peace Camp in 1983, in

an attempt to explore the experience, to wonder what meaning she can give it now, and to employ it as a mediator to explore different representations of landscape. This first chapter weaves its way through photographs, poetry, and memories of events/performances that occurred: women dancing in the desert, slogans, washing strung out on makeshift lines. Her memory folds her back into images of her father as a young man going off to war and his subsequent life devoted to 'replaying' that war. She remembers her childhood visiting war memorials dotted all around the country and how at Pine Gap the biggest march was on Remembrance Day, an attempted 'rewriting of the hegemonic spatial practice' (p.26). She re-enters the need to create new signs of place and belonging and to present them in the landscape, be it through graffiti, slogans, ribbons woven through the security fences or tents erected on the side of the road. The women's protest is made visible; their desires are made visible. Through this weave of memory she concludes that she went to Pine Gap 'to protest about men's violence' (p.28).

But this time she enters this memory landscape searching for something else. This still offers her alternative social practices, or what Elspeth Probyn calls 'recasting of forms of power'¹⁰, but she does not re-enter this space in the name of all women. Somerville ends the chapter with the painful memory of the Aboriginal women going away angry, upset and feeling misled by the white women and their reasons for protesting. The local Aboriginal women speak as custodians of a land already mapped with songs and songlines, and this disrupts the white women's sense of a unified protest. In the absence of even the possibility of translation the significance of the local Aboriginal women's dancing, songs and stories is lost on Somerville and the other non-Aboriginal women. However, it is the Aboriginal women's commitment to their country that unsettles the white, masculine, nationalist ideas of belonging; falsifying them as universals, creating other possibilities, connections, lines of flight. The Aboriginal women offer the non-Aboriginal women alternative forms of belonging, but in imposing their own meaning of the protest upon the Aboriginal women, the white women risk imprisoning the Aboriginal women in their desires.

Despite the painful outcome of the protest Somerville ends this chapter by locating the Pine Gap Peace Protest as the site in which her work took a new direction. The complex interaction between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women—in which they

fail to be able to communicate, yet still participate in the protest together—Somerville records as a liminal space which disrupted her ‘straight lines and roads’ (p.43) of meaning and allowed new possibilities to emerge.

For Deleuze, to think is, like Foucault, to seize that which is nomadic, which escapes conventional categories. The interesting parts of our lives are the points at which identity breaks down.¹¹

Deleuze argues that Nietzsche’s unhealth (‘madness’) was not something that he managed to overcome most of his life so he might continue to write, but rather as in keeping ‘with Nietzsche’s refusal to believe in a unified self, his attempts to create a sort of ‘intersubjectivity’ between different selves...’.¹² In thinking through her ‘crisis of the body’ Somerville begins by what could be called being in dialogue with her different selves. Initially, when she was trying to intellectualise her way out of her crisis, she had ‘strange and frightening dreams’ in which she experienced herself as a fragmented body. Her body was cracking up and she—‘I’—might fall through these cracks. Or as Descartes put it:

[l]ike a man who walks alone and in darkness, I resolve to go slowly, and to use much circumspection in everything, that if I did not advance speedily, at least I should keep from falling.¹³

The fear is of falling into the darkness and unknown that is the body. The place in which unthought thoughts, if not captured and restrained in the restrictions of a unified identity, might cause the (un)knowing ‘I’ to fall into the ‘oblivion’ of unreason.

Instead of falling forever into the abyss that lurks just beyond the boundary of Western reason, Somerville creates mediators. Paradoxically, she attempts to move beyond her self-imprisonment through expressing internalised images that occur to her during massages; reaching out through retreat. She attempts to summon into words images that make her a stranger to herself and through people, philosophy and landscapes, of both her present and her past, forges new connections. She creates mediators who might enable her, during her uncertainty, to express herself. Her ‘self’ is no longer a project that must be kept unified as she enters new territories, but site(s) for forging new connections that continually falsify established ideas. In so doing, the radical

self-alienation of her illness might yield a self that is always becoming, rather than a self who is affirmed through assimilating the Other.

The same paradox of performance is apparent in the constitution of the cassowary project. The project relies on the visibility of the normally invisible bird. In fact the bird must retain its invisibility to survive, but in order for the public to accept the need for protection it must be made visible. The methods for the renewal of cassowary habitat rely on the invisible (abject), a movement from the miniature and unacceptable of the cassowary dropping to 'the immense' of a rainforest. Similarly the act of inhabiting—one's body, or one's home—necessarily remains the invisible ground on which all thought and action is based (p.207).

The paradox of performance that Somerville speaks of is the necessity of retreating during the time of writing this text so that she might be able to perform, to speak in her own name. The first retreat was her illness, a retreat from words, and the second to a friend's cottage as a refusal to perform for others.

I am reminded of Deleuze in an interview speaking on Foucault's work:

[h]istory, according to Foucault, circumstances us and sets limits, it doesn't determine what we are, but what we are in the process of differing from; it doesn't fix our identity, but disperses it into our essential otherness...History, in short, is what separates us from ourselves and what we have to go through and beyond in order to think what we are.¹⁴

Deleuze is not advocating a retreat into an essential self but rather that we find a name for ourselves by opening ourselves up to multiplicity: desire not being domesticated to the known or prescribed.¹⁵ It seems Somerville wants to feel the world differently by exploring not knowing the world and herself so that she might be able to create new connections. She retreats from words and having to perform for others so she might begin to be able to feel and to 'make visible the invisible ground of the function of inhabiting' (p.206). In this there is, of course, the fear of being reterritorialised: that the fragile images and words might evaporate in the presence of already well constituted language and ideas.

However, it is to fragile, previously unspoken images that Somerville returns during her illness as possible sites of transformation. When Somerville was working with Patsy Cohen on *Ingelba*¹⁶ she met an elderly Aboriginal woman, Emily, with whom she remained friends until Emily's death. 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' (p.79). Emily offers Somerville no more information on the importance of the Old Queen to her.

Somerville says:

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 (p.79).

I think of Somerville witnessing Emily's sadness and her continual dispossession that the 'graves not being swept clean' represents, but also her quiet performance of showing herself to herself in a language uncommon to Somerville. Stephen Muecke writes:

[s]omething new begins when the answer the local gives is not forced into a universal language of rationality in order to have an understanding determined by this interrogator from a more powerful place.¹⁷

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 this performance that she returns to in her attempt to create paths out of her 'crisis of the body.'

SPATIALITY

Somerville takes up Liz Ferrier's argument that colonialism is a spatial conquest and that therefore a feminist and postcolonial transformation primarily needs to be spatial. That is, that the land was mapped and storied in a singular, authoritative way that served a nationalist agenda which denied the coexistence of multiple inhabitations and hence multiple narratives. It is when she is working on *Sun Dancin'*, a collaborative project with four Aboriginal women, in which they are attempting to incorporate multiple narratives, that Somerville has her 'crisis of the body'.

The Aboriginal women gesture toward the difficulty of telling their stories and of their voices being heard amongst the din of what Somerville calls the 'complexities of the relationship between their oral stories and the written discourses that constitute Aboriginal people and impinge on our storytelling' (p.100). The Aboriginal women speak of knowing that they are considered to be without

culture as they have no Dreamtime stories due to colonial dispossession, a dispossession that continues through a lack of recognition of the multiple ways these women are connected to country.

The Aboriginal women need Somerville for her skills and her access to the world of publishing and Somerville needs mediators to allow her access to a body/place connection. Somerville wants a bodily presence in her writing but she is concerned that her writing and academic skills, and her access to the privileged world of publishing, might further marginalise Aboriginal people's voices. She poses the question:

[w]hat stories does mine make space for and which ones does it displace? There is still an overarching sense that all the landscape is marked by Aboriginal stories and there has been no resolution to the questions of whose land? and whose story can be told?...I have been educated into the privileges of the world of writing. Does it make room for multiple stories? Can your story be written in here? Is it a postcolonial space? (p.5)

How can a feminist/postcolonial belonging be established without it becoming another colonialist discourse? In her desire for a bodily presence in the landscape, Somerville risks assimilating the Aboriginal women's bodily presence. Her 'crisis of the body' could be understood as a crisis of identity: not only an asking who am *I* in this place, but also a 'falling to pieces' at the prospect of *seeing* herself as a coloniser, when she has previously understood herself, as a woman, as continually under threat of colonisation. This might have allowed her to empathise with Aboriginal women, but in so doing she risks substituting her body for theirs.

Somerville is forcefully returned to her own body by her debilitating illness. To help her out of this crisis she finds a mediator in the work of Elizabeth Grosz:

putting the body at the centre of our notion of subjectivity transforms the way we think about knowledge, about power, about desire...and this entails the possibility of forming other kinds of knowledge, other kinds of social interrelations, other forms of ethics, other systems of representation based on different interests, not only those of women, but those of cultural others...whose bodies are inscribed in different forms and therefore whose subjectivities and intellectual frameworks are different.¹⁸

Contemporary feminist theory has opened up the debate on the 'implications of accepting the role the body plays in the production and evaluation of knowledge'.¹⁹ That is to say, the body is recognised as a volatile site. Somerville furthers this debate by foraying not only into the dangerous territory of the body but, importantly, the equally volatile landscape.

[F]or it would be a mistake to think the subject, any more than the country, is settled and that a single skein of discourse wound back and forth between the twin spindles of the self and space, life and place, could adequately represent the openness of existence here, the uncertainty of its outcome.²⁰

As Paul Carter continues, '[t]he solipsism of imagining countries as new has already been commented on: new countries are autobiographical fictions.' Learning and knowledge come out of specific landscapes and are experienced and produced by specific bodies. In turn landscapes and bodies are socio-cultural productions. The country does not lie down to be mapped and known. Somerville cannot have a bodily presence in the stories of the Aboriginal women if she attempts to inhabit their landscape by substituting her body for theirs. Attempting to gain a sense of belonging by 'simply' appropriating Aboriginal stories is a continuation of colonisation. In as much as she does so, Somerville risks what many black theorists have accused white feminism of, that is, employing black women for the purpose of ideological tourism.²¹ Black women continue to be a means by which white people *improve* themselves and in so doing 'black women are captured in a singular role or mission to humanise white women.'²² I would argue that the burden of the seeming impossibility of writing a bodily presence in the landscape without further colonising Aboriginal women *sickens* Somerville.

We have to see creation as tracing a path between impossibilities, without impossibilities you won't have lines of flight...²³

It might be these very impossibilities through which new connections, or as Deleuze and Guattari would call them, new lines of flight, might begin to emerge. In attempting to recognise and write with these impossibilities, a stumbling, stuttering, new form of writing emerges. In investing something of one's subjectivity, in risking falling, speaking through and out of her crisis, an understanding emerges that belonging cannot be taken, but rather it must be negotiated.

During her 'crisis of the body' Somerville returns to her memory of Emily searching for the Old Queen's grave. I return to that site in the text to listen once again to Somerville:

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 (p.79).

Emily's bodily presence, her performance of belonging, is not one in which Somerville can be at home. However, a dynamic space is opened up by Emily's performance, a space Somerville returns to as an unmapped site in which she might be able to begin to reimagine herself. It could be argued that Somerville returns to this performance because she cannot translate Emily's performance, as she has so often done as an oral historian. Somerville loses sight of herself, and in so doing opens up, in the words Elspeth Probyn:

different ways of knowing my self and her self, ways of knowing that insist upon alternative relations of alterity. It is to argue that my passion to know her does not have to be embedded in a will to control her...To engage our imaginations precisely opens us into a space where possibilities can be envisioned; a space where I may no longer recognize my self.²⁴

Just as feminism has embraced the body as a dynamic site, Emily and the Aboriginal women with whom Somerville collaborates offer her an insight into a dynamic relationship with the land in which one body cannot be substituted for another: a relationship which demands a reconfiguration of herself.

There's no subject, but a production of subjectivity: subjectivity has to be produced, when its time arrives, precisely because there is no subject.²⁵

Foucault understands subjectivity as a process. He speaks of 'establishing an endurable zone in which to install ourselves, confront things, take hold, breathe—in short, think.'²⁶ He argues that we can avoid death and madness if we make existing into 'new' ways, an 'art'. *Body/Landscape Journals* as a 'postcolonial writing practice' is an attempt to exist in 'new' ways and establish an endurable zone, to confront things or, in the words of Marie Dundas, to 'make it good for ourselves to go forward' (p.212).

Body/Landscape Journals began with Somerville's 'crisis of the body' in which she had

frightening dreams about a fragmented body—one in which my body was sliced into fine layers of flesh which were cooked and spread with vegemite. I was trying to think through complex theoretical problems and could no longer. I had fallen into the abyss of Western dualistic thinking predicated on separation rather than connection (p.12).

Her anxiety of belonging becomes a liminal space.²⁷ Her autobio-

graphical self becomes a way of thinking through new relationships to alterity. Memory in *Body/Landscape Journals* does not act as nostalgia but it becomes the recognition of the multiplicity of the self, as site(s) that can activate becomings. Somerville suggests that the creative possibilities of her belonging are not through assimilating Indigenous relationships to the land, but by stepping back and recognising the specific and dynamic dialogue between every *body's landscape(s)*—a retreat that might offer up an opportunity for reducing the white settler anxiety of belonging.

NOTES

- 1 Somerville, Margaret, *Body/Landscape Journals* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1999), p.11. All page numbers will be in parenthesis following the quote.
- 2 Probyn, Fiona, *Body/Landscape Journals* lecture, 'Gender, Race and Australian Identity', Gender Studies Department, University of Sydney, 2001.
- 3 Deleuze, Gilles, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.121.
- 4 Ibid, p.121.
- 5 Marks, John, *Gilles Deleuze Vitalism and Multiplicity* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p.6.
- 6 Ibid, p.6.
- 7 Probyn, E., *Sexing the Self* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.29.
- 8 Marks, op. cit. p.23.
- 9 Deleuze, op. cit. p.171. The translator defines becoming as 'Rather than a transition between two states of being, a line a development defined by a starting point and end point, becoming is a free play of lines or flows whose intersections define unstable points of transitory identity...' see p.185-6 no. 8.
- 10 Probyn, op. cit. p.31.
- 11 Marks, op cit. p.8.
- 12 Ibid, p.8
- 13 Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method and the Mediations*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p.54.
- 14 Deleuze, op. cit. p. 95.
- 15 Ibid. p.146.
- 16 Cohen, Patsy; Somerville, Margaret, *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).
- 17 Muecke, Stephen. *No Road* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), p.184.
- 18 Grosz, E. cited in Somerville, p.219.

SOUTHERLY

- 19 Grosz, E. *Space, Time and Perversion* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), p. 26.
- 20 Carter, Paul. *Living in a New Country* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p.3.
- 21 Trinh Minh-ha. *Women, Native, Other: writing postcoloniality and feminism*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 22 Probyn, op. cit. p.157.
- 23 Deleuze, op. cit. p.133.
- 24 Probyn, op. cit. p.163.
- 25 Deleuze, op. cit. p.113-114.
- 26 Ibid, p.111.
- 27 'Liminality can perhaps be described as a frucile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process...' (cited in Somerville, p.31).