Title: Nomad Strategies; Artists, travel and personal transformation

“You cannot step into the same river twice.”
Heraclitus of Ephesus, circa 500 BCE

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Statement of originality

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ABSTRACT

If we were to explicate further the anatomy of a traveller, we could say that it is precisely in the very process of negotiating ‘the between’, traversing the threshold and crossing boundary, that she/he makes her/himself a traveller.

Syed Manzurul Islam

In this exegesis I explore the transformative and self-liberating possibilities travel offers to artists who choose to travel, including myself. I propose that in the process of negotiating ‘the between’ and traversing the boundaries between the individual and the ‘other’ whom a traveller inevitably meets in the space of travel, the individual will confront internal boundaries which, when crossed, offer a true possibility for self-liberation.

I have concentrated on artists because I have called myself one for thirty years; as well I have travelled and lived outside Australia for considerable periods of time. The experiences of travel and developing my work in a variety of other spaces is reflected in my past and current practice as a contemporary artist. This will make this exegesis partly autobiographical, however I will also explore the travels of other artists, notably the work of Ian Fairweather and affect of travel upon their practice as artists.

Syed Manzurul Islam proposes that the crucial difference that separates a truly nomadic traveller from those he describes as ‘sedentary travellers’ is the acceptance of the opportunity to change, to peel away the layers of preconception that we all carry and to ‘become-other.’ That is, to bridge the space between our external lives and our internal state of being in the unique space of the journey. Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes art as the bridge that can join the ‘other’ and us through the creation of personal, creative languages flexible enough to be that bridge.

I will refer to my own and other artists’ journals to explore the ramifications of my and others’ journeys as a way to self-liberation and creativity. This is a pathway that writer and

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1 Syed Manzurul Islam, The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka: (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), 5.
2 ibid., vii.
lecture Rob Pope proposes, as leading to an ongoing process of ‘coming-to-be’ which is both unpredictable and only ‘ever fully graspable in the event’. This Pope describes as ‘invention’ over a ‘discovery’ model of creativity.\(^4\) Travel, I propose, is a way to self-liberation and creativity as a complex series of interactions within the space of the journey.

\(^4\) Rob Pope, Creativity Theory, History, Practise (UK: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 117.
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INTRODUCTION

The real voyage of Discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.\(^5\)
Marcel Proust

The travel writer Bruce Chatwin\(^6\) and ethnologist Syed Manzurul Islam both propose that the natural home of humanity is on the road.\(^7\) If so, then it follows that movement is our natural condition, the journey an end in itself. The artist as traveller enters a nomadic life, realising their own state of otherness, travelling lightly and, as Proust observed, seeking new eyes.\(^8\) How does the individual artist-traveller realise the personally transformative possibilities travel offers? The answer: by experiencing the self-liberating possibilities of the fluid space of the journey, this is the nomad strategy.

An artist-traveller such as Ian Fairweather was one for whom travel was the path to self-liberation and whose home was the road. Yet the artist-traveller is not alone; they are always greeting the ‘other’, those they meet and interact with, in whose space they move, as well as other travellers. The ‘other’ for the artist-traveller may well be a part of their internal self as it is something outside. This knowledge may be the greatest of liberations, as the space of the journey offers the opportunity to recognise, in motion, the fluid relationships of our inner consciousness and our external existence. The theorist and writer Henri Lefebvre recognised this in his description of ‘abstract space’:

Homogeneous in appearance (and appearance is its strength), abstract space is by no means simple. In the first place, there are its constitutive dualities. For it is both a result and a container, both produced and productive – on the one hand a representation of space (geometric homogeneity) and on the other a representational space (phallic). The supposed congruence of the formants of this duality serves, however, to mask its duplicity. For, while abstract space remains an arena of practical action, it is also an ensemble of images, signs

\(^7\)Syed Manzurul Islam, The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996).
The space described by Lefebvre is a complex, short-lived but highly creative space of fluid encounters, contact points and relationships, an open-ended site rather than a defined territory. The abstract space is the bridging space between the exterior world of our everyday existence and our interior world of experience, perception and is dependent on the creation of an internal language of poetry for its precarious but tenacious existence. Derived from the original Greek word poieo meaning either ‘to make’ or ‘to create’, it is the creative act that gives the abstract space its reason for being, both creating and using its creation for creation, which is Art.\(^9\)

To enter this space an artist-traveller will need to imagine the journey as a space of self-liberation.\(^11\) An artist-traveller needs to be open to the possibility of moving beyond the binary distinction of ‘them’ and ‘us’ to be able to envision ‘becoming-other’, truly gaining new eyes as proposed by Marcel Proust and Syed Manzurul Islam.\(^12\) The alternative is to be, in Islam’s terms, blind to the possibilities of travel, a sedentary traveller, a conquistador.\(^13\)

**Artist as Traveller**

It is important to recognise the essential place that the physical reality of travel has in my own growth as an artist and person. I am certain my own work is incomprehensible without the reader being aware of just how critical travel, and remembering the experiences of travel, are to me.

While not all artists are travellers, travel/journeys figure prominently in many artists’

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11 Michel Foucault first put the concept of the Heptopic space forward beginning with the Benthamite space of the panopticon. Both Homi Bhabha and Edward Soja in his book *Third Space* expanded this conceptualisation of geographical and imaginary space. Edward Soja in his chapter on Foucault, in *Third Space* acknowledges the debt owed to Foucault in notes made late in Foucault’s career on the nature of space.
12 Syed Manzurul Islam, *The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka* (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996)
13 ibid.
experiences. The artist-traveller, by my definition, is one who makes travel an integral part of their approach to their art and, even if unable to travel for whatever reason, is still conceptually in motion. Each journey and each artist-traveller is unique. Only the individual can undertake a journey of personal transformation and self-liberation. When Proust talks of acquiring ‘new eyes’ this needs to be understood in context of the individual artist; the eyes are plural but the person who sees through them is singular.

While I will review the journeys of a number of artists in this exegesis, the constant travels of Ian Fairweather are of special importance to me. Scottish-born Fairweather travelled throughout the Asia-Pacific region from the end of the First World War to the early 1970s. On his way the artist lived within numerous cultures, encountered numerous belief systems and developed a body of work that ultimately made his own life journey the central theme. Fairweather never took the easy road; his journeys were always a struggle, culminating in his extreme raft voyage from Darwin to Roti Island in Indonesia. This perilous voyage, which almost cost him his life and sanity, caused Fairweather to jettison much of his former painting practice and produce the majestic body of work that characterised his late flowering. As an example of the affect of travel and personal transformation, I can think of no more extreme and compelling illustration of the commitment required to acquire ‘new eyes’.

I will also discuss the work of a number of other artists, such as Michael Stevenson, Jun Chen, Joe Furlonger, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. All these artists have made travelling an essential element of their practice and lives. Unlike Fairweather, these artists travel in very different ways that affect the space of travel, the actual journey. Fairweather travelled by boat, foot and train, living on eggs in a freezing room in Beijing for instance, without the modern mass-communication systems available to us. Now however, we can compress the time of a journey and take advantage of the myriad opportunities for artist-residencies, international exhibitions, conferences and virtual-connections via the Internet. Travel has become far more affordable, safer and faster than when Fairweather travelled. Yet this has also changed the nature of travel, folding the space of the journey into itself and limiting travel’s unique qualities of time to interact with ‘others’ both on the road and through
whose territory the artist travels. Unencumbered by home, locale or established relationships, the traveller, as Phil Cousineau constantly emphasises, is free to question everything through their constant and uniquely individual life in motion. It is in the acquisition of experience freed from the blinkers of the past or expectations of the future, accessible only by living in the moment, that the journey’s space becomes liberation for the artist.

My own autobiographical narrative, as represented in my Artist journals and body of works from 1973 to now, will be analysed. Through these journeys I have built a fund of memories, relationships and experiences, which today provides the raw material for the work I create. My Artist journals have been carried in all my travels from the late 1970s to now. The journals are both raw material and something more: an ongoing work in progress in themselves. The importance of the point, that this project is very much based on my own experiences of travel, has been brought home to me in virtual conversation with Associate Professor James Macbeth from Murdoch University who has written extensively on travel and travellers, especially those who take alternative paths of travel such as cruising sailors. Macbeth coined the term ‘affirmative deviance’ to describe the decision taken by those who wish to move outside mainstream concepts of travel. That is, to embrace modes of travel which allow chance encounters to work, within the space and time of travel. I have been privileged to travel for a year as a cruising sailor myself and it was a transforming journey. But this fluid experience happened only because I learnt, eventually, to allow it to and dropped my own guard, letting the journey, like my paintings now, to take its own path instead of imposing my own agenda. The traveller must be ready to let in the experiences of the journey, or it can be a wasted effort. Though my experiences are my own and unrepeatable for any other traveller, the conceptual focus of art-as-linked-to-experience is the basis for my projects. It is through this that the visual languages I need to traverse the external and internal terrains revealed by travel are put into motion.

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15 Mark Keith Elliot-Ranken, *Artist journals: possession of the author*.
16 I am indebted to Ass. Prof. Macbeth for his help in reading and analysing this introduction.
18 While cruising on my yacht *Dersu Usarla* I kept two journals; one was the ship’s log of courses used, conditions and ports visited, the other journal was a personal one, a proto-artist journal of writing, impressions and small drawings.
The point of the journey is to allow the space of the road and the lessons of being in motion, not fixed in locale, to clear away any preconceptions of self and ‘others’ and allow fluid relationships between them to evolve.

**The Sedentary Traveller**

The sedentary traveller is a paradoxical term used by Syed Manzurul Islam to describe an attitude to travel. The sedentary traveller goes from point A to B in the quickest possible way. What is between does not concern this traveller, only departure and destination. I am reminded of my own flights to destinations such as South Africa. I flew to Africa in 1993. After taking off from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, we all sat enclosed within the plane for nine hours in the dark, chasing the sun across the Indian Ocean. I felt disorientation on landing in Johannesburg, wondering where was the space of the journey. There is no period of transition: you are cocooned. Islam’s point is that the sedentary traveller misses the gift of travel, which is letting yourself be open to change. There is no possibility of new eyes for the sedentary traveller and a denial of the very space offered by the journey.

At the extreme end of this sedentary travel experience, Islam positions the figure of the conquistador. The image of the conquistador is formidably armoured, predatory and ruthless, intent on conquest followed by a return to familiar territory. Unconcerned with the fate of others, except as objects of exploitation, this character and his descendants have terrorised the lives of not just the inhabitants of the new world (the Americas) but those of all the other continents including Australia.

Syed Manzurul Islam uses the conquistador to represent the nature of the relationship between ‘them’ and ‘us’ in the colonial and imperial periods. Islam states:

… a conquistador moves in space, arrives at a different place. Yet bound by the pre-set goals they never leave the point of departure: they move folded in the inside. They might travel in the fastest possible vehicle and cover a thousand

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miles yet they remain where they are, because they are on a rigid line, which keeps them grounded in the enclosure of their home.\textsuperscript{20}

Islam asks us here to imagine our own air-travel from airport to airport. It is a sanitised experience no longer in touch with the ground and lacking the immediacy of touch, smell and taste. Instead such travel is quick, comfortable and above all, appears safe, especially from contact with the uncertainties of the ‘other’:

Despite so many rituals of departure, they cannot really depart. For that, they would need the intensity of speed, since speed is the secret of the supple line of the nomadic traveller. It is not an easy task, for it is a question of becoming.\textsuperscript{21}

Here Syed Manzurul Islam notes that, bound by pre-set goals, the conquistador never really leaves his/her point of departure. In other words, such a rigid traveller never interacts with or indeed ever really sees anyone else except as type, group or ‘object’. The ‘other’ is bound to be servant, or object of exploitation, not an individual, not an equal capable of having or using his or her own voice. Conquistadors are trapped in a cage of their own making, unable or unwilling to be surprised or become anything they are not already. It is not an easy task, as Syed Manzurul Islam reminds us, to ‘become-other’, imagining the possibility of self-liberation. To ‘become-other’ is to step outside one’s own experience, to truly live beside and engage with a new culture and a new locale.

The writer Makimoto Tsugio in \textit{Digital Nomad} argues that the constant technical advances in both travel and communication make professional and business nomads into the new colonisers.\textsuperscript{22} He argues that the nature of travel has changed, in line with the spread of globalisation and the mobility of trans-national companies. We are no longer talking of the seasonal passage of traditional nomads such as the Bedouins. The modern nomad, artists included, moves from hotel to hotel or artist residency to biennale with ease. Such ‘nomads’ run a risk of flying over rather than moving within the milieu of their hosts wherever they are. Travel writer Kim Cheng Boey, in his account of his own journey in

\textsuperscript{20}\textsuperscript{21}\textsuperscript{22}Islam Syed Manzurul, \textit{The Ethics of Travel} (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), 56. 
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 56. 
\textsuperscript{22}Tsugio Makimoto, \textit{Digital Nomad} (UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1997), 56.
Between Stations\textsuperscript{23} refers to and describes other modern nomads, those closer to James Macbeth’s concept of ‘affirmative deviance’.\textsuperscript{24} These are his fellow travellers in the backpack and cheap hotels across the world. These travellers have truly, for the space of their journeys, made the road home and are of no fixed address that is a position outside and unencumbered by any considerations beside travel.\textsuperscript{25}

It would be dangerous to slip into yet another binary construction of ‘them and us’ and Edward Said warns against the superficialities of simple Oriental/Occidental definitions\textsuperscript{26} which can be seen to have crystallised in the period of Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt.\textsuperscript{27} The future emperor was vice-president of the Institut de l’Égypte (The Institute of Egypt) that he immediately established after his first victory in Egypt, the Battle of the Pyramids (July 21, 1798). Napoleon took with him one hundred and fifty-one savants, scientists, engineers and artists to map, explore, categorise and pillage both ancient and contemporary Egypt and its then Ottoman rulers.\textsuperscript{28} In this attempt to gather systematically as much information on Egypt, both its past and present, Napoleon instigated the process of ‘othering’ as a scientific project and therefore a weapon of imperial power by Europe over its neighbours, knowledge as a tool for such as Napoleon.\textsuperscript{29} As writer Lucie Goulet states: ‘Edward Said considers 1798 to be the point of crystallisation of Orientalism. The campaign started a trend of professionalised and systematic Orientalist scholarship.’\textsuperscript{30} The Egyptian Campaign did see some startling discoveries, notably the Rosetta stone in mid-July 1799 that allowed the emerging discipline of Archaeology to begin understanding the languages of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations.\textsuperscript{31} Yet the fate of the Rosetta stone, now in the British Museum, symbolises the cost its rightful owners the Egyptians had to endure: the wholesale sacking of their historical and cultural artefacts, as well as repeated

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{25} Kim Cheng Boey, \textit{Between Stations} (Australia: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2009), 224.
\bibitem{27} Ibid., 76-92.
\bibitem{28} Linda Hall Library, USA, “Napoleon and the Scientific Expedition to Egypt,” \texttt{www.lindahall.org} (accessed February 17, 2010).
\bibitem{29} Lucie Goulet, “Napoleon’s Battle of the Pyramids,” \texttt{http://heritage-key.com} (accessed April 16, 2010).
\bibitem{30} Ibid., 1.
\bibitem{31} Linda Hall Library, USA, “Napoleon and the Scientific Expedition to Egypt; The Rosetta Stone,” \texttt{www.lindahall.org} (accessed April 15, 2010).
\end{thebibliography}
physical, military and political invasions by France and Britain. Egypt, through the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo, is currently negotiating the Stone’s return.\(^{32}\)

The Institute of Egypt’s own history is revealing. Though it was dissolved in 1801 after the French evacuation of Egypt, the members of the organisation, such as the engineer Nicholas Conte and the art historian Dominique Vivant Denon, continued to be highly influential in Europe. The major publication of the Institute, *La Description de l’Égypte* of 1822 running to twenty-four volumes, helped bring ‘Egyptology’ and ‘Orientalism’ as disciplines into being.\(^{33}\) Not all the Institute’s findings were beneficial; its pronouncements on the nature and character of the Egyptians themselves define the argument Said puts forward concerning ‘othering’ and the Orientalist definitions which so dominated European views on the Near and Far East for many years.\(^{34}\) The savants in the end were in the service of a conqueror for a conqueror’s use; the impressive body of knowledge gained helped to stereotype ‘others’ and reinforce the growing colonial/imperial projects of several European powers.\(^{35}\) ‘Othering’ does not just happen by conquest, as Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* argues; rather the imperial empire’s need to impose their metropolitan culture onto a formally independent territory, creates and supports the process of subjugation.\(^{36}\) Imperialism’s most pervasive weapon is very much that which Napoleon in Egypt first conceived: an examination of another culture with a view to categorise, objectify and place in a hierarchy of value vis-à-vis the examining culture of the imperial project. Through this process, imperial control reaches into the very consciousness of the colonised, making each colonial individual an object of study and allowing that understanding, that view of being subject to an unceasing objectifying gaze, as writer and revolutionary theorist Franz Fanon observed, to seep into the very unconscious of the colonised through language and culture.\(^{37}\) Writer Jennifer Poulos says of Fanon’s conceptualisation of ‘othering’ that:

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 1.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{37}\) Franz Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth.*
Fanon insists, however, that the category “white” depends for its stability on its negation “black”. Neither exists without the other, and both come into being at the moment of imperial conquest.  

This allows the imperial regime to repudiate any attempt by the colonised oppressed to have an independent voice, as semiologist and writer Roland Barthes stated.  

Barthes uses the example of an image in a magazine of a black soldier saluting the French flag to explore the myriad ways a gesture, saluting the flag by a soldier who may be ‘French’ by birth, cultural conditioning, or military conscription, can be used to fill and empty this image of several different interpretations, while denying a space for the soldier to explain or advance any narrative of his place in the photograph.  

In this example the African soldier is rendered mute as are his political, cultural and social beliefs, thereby making the very culture of the ‘other’ dependent on and seen through the colonising metropolitan culture of the imperial state.  

The European empires as physical delineations of territory on the map of the world have largely, though not totally, disappeared, but the cultural global penetration of culture, economics, politics and society have not dissipated, as Edward Said again points out.  

In undertaking a journey rather than a passage from departure to destination, the artist-as-traveller needs to recognise, repudiate and avoid the politics of ‘them and us’ that reinforce the subject-object hierarchy, which places the ‘other’ always in the position of inferiority, as revolutionary writer Franz Fanon observed.  

As indicated, Fanon’s identification of language as a prime weapon of colonisation creates what Fanon saw as a state of psychosis within the colonised.  

Our post-colonial condition has seen changes. The limitations of an impoverished one-way gaze, implicit in the subject-object dialogue, are no longer sufficient in our post-colonial context. A no longer powerless ‘other’ will not allow this to continue; they have regained their voices even turning the language and technology of the empire

40 Ibid., 125-129.  
41 Ibid., 125-129.  
43 Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Mask.  
back onto the empire builders, as the literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak relates. Spivak argues that the classificatory divisions once applied to the other of Asia, Africa, women and the poor are now obsolete as these formally dis-empowered groupings turn back the gaze upon the their now ousted colonial masters. 45 The appearance and growth of ‘Subaltern Studies’46, the reappearance of non-western travel writing by such as Ibn Battuta, the great 13th century Moroccan traveller47 or Zheng He, the great Chinese admiral of the 14th century, are but the tip of the iceberg in this regard.48

**Underpinnings**

The influential writers I will draw from fall into two broad and overlapping areas. The first I define as those who explore the theoretical issues of travel, interaction with the ‘other’, creativity and nature of the journey. These include Syed Manzurul Islam, Joseph Campbell, James Clifford, Rob Pope, Edward Said, Kathleen M. Adams, Franz Fanon and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The second group are the travel writers from Homer to Tim Severin, Bruce Chatwin, Dr David Lewis and Jonathan Raban and includes such publications as Lonely Planet or the poetics of Mark O’Conner (*The Fiesta of Men*).49 All of these writers explore experiences of travel that defy any easy classification because such experience is intensely personal. As Joseph Campbell writes:

> Schopenhausser, [sic] in his bold and really magnificent “transendentent Speculation upon an Apparent Intention in the Fate of the Individual” (1850), takes up the idea, remarking that in the later years of a lifetime, looking back over the course of one’s days and noticing how encounters and events that appeared at the time to be accidental became the crucial structuring features of an unintended lifestory through which the potentialities of one’s character were fostered to fulfilment, one may find it difficult to resist the notion of the course of one’s biography as comparable to that of a cleverly constructed

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47 A.S. Chughtai, “Ibn Battuta the great traveller.” This article originally appeared in *Muslim Technologist*, March 1990 and is reproduced with permission. www.umrah.net (accessed April 17, 2010).
novel, wondering who the author of the surprising plot can have been; considering further, that as the shaping of one’s own life was largely an effect of personalities accidentally encountered, so too, one must oneself have worked effects upon others.  

Joseph Campbell has explored the metaphorical journey, the quest, in a great many publications. In drawing on Schopenhauer, Campbell has explored the concept that the appearance of things is, in reality, a personal narrative imagined from our chance encounter with others and situations ‘accidentally encountered’ to create memory. Campbell proposes that this may convince us that it is, erroneously, the true nature of our world. In actuality we are affected and affect many others in our journey, if only we were truly aware of it.  

To unpack the nature of travel I will draw on the following theoretical sources. Both Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault propose that the colonial gaze was created from a desire for control, power and differentiation from and fear of the other. This translated into a conceptualisation of the other as mute, without a history and inferior, in need of defining, controlling, teaching and cleansing. This has resulted in a binary characterisation of the gaze through the imposition of the language of the coloniser as derived from the imperial experiences of the west. The one-way nature of the gaze is based on the power of surveillance leading to the incarceral space of the panopticon, the Benthamite proposal for an all-seeing state of surveillance that Foucault identifies as a model of social and political control.  

Both culture and language have been produced to serve the interests of colonial masters. This frequent subservience allows the space for the binary division of ‘them’ from ‘us’, as

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51 Ibid., 110.
52 Ibid., 110.
53 Syed Manzurul Islam and Edward Soja both attribute Lacan and Foucault as laying the philosophical groundwork for understanding the nature of the gaze. Soja further cites Lacan in The Production of Space and Foucault in unpublished notes titled ‘Of Other Spaces’ written just before his death in 1984 as precursors for the concept of third space in his book Third Space.
55 Michel Foucault builds his creative understanding of the surveillance state around the Benthamite project of the incarceration machine, the panopticon expressed in Crime and Punishment. This also had its influence on the settlement of Sydney Australia as a penal colony in 1788.
Edward Said states in his books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, to exist at the expense of a liberated existence of equals.\(^56\) Liberation, as understood in this inquiry, is not just the objective but also the ongoing process of the personal journey. It is a self-liberation of the senses. It can be seen as the destination which must always be strived for, yet it is not merely an external goal but inherent in the exploration of the interior terrain for the traveller as artist. Curiously the revolutionary, writer and traveller Ernesto Che Guevara touched on the nature of this liberation in his speech of 1960 to Cuban medical students.\(^57\) Guevara spoke of the revolutionary finding his or her own path daily, as a road to self-liberation. The revolutionary leader made clear that each passage to liberation is an individual decision, a road only the protagonist can choose to take into a space of transformation, action and liberation:

\[\ldots\text{and if we know the direction in which we have to travel, then the only thing left for us is to know the daily stretch of the road and to take it. Nobody can point out that stretch; that stretch is the personal road of each individual; it is what he or she will do every day, what he or she will gain from their individual experience, and what he or she will give of themselves in practising their profession, dedicated to the people’s well-being.}\]

The artist-traveller has the opportunity to realise a personal language of liberation, to become-other. Such languages may be based on the differentiation Carl Jung made between sign and symbol in his understanding of the aesthetic response (though this may not be the only strategy).\(^59\) Maurice Merleau-Ponty also posits a relationship with language that has us existing within the language of creativity, as we create it. In this understanding language is an ambiguous creative act; we construct meaning from experience yet also independently of any particular experience; that is, the meaning is constructed by both memory and the experience in the moment of creation.\(^60\) Philosopher Bernard Flynn states that Merleau-

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\(^56\) Edward Said decisively links the nature of the imperial colonising gaze to emergence of a Euro-centric construction of the world beyond its own borders and its subsequent projection back onto the inhabitants of newly contacted cultures in Asia-Pacific, Australia America and Africa.


\(^59\) Donald H Mayo, *Jung and the Aesthetic Experience The unconscious as Source of Artistic Inspiration* (USA: Peter Lang, 1995).

Ponty recognised and gave a central place to the ambiguity of our relationship with reality, as we perceive it:

To speak is to make a gesture in one direction of my linguistic world. Immediately a difficulty emerges. It is clear that I can gesture, or point, to a tree in the visual world, a world which is shared intersubjectively. However there is not only one given world.\textsuperscript{61}

These new languages and each aesthetic language are as individual as its creator, as poetic as art is, and it is the poetry of struggle and the language of liberation.

Doctor, sailor and ethnographer David Lewis recognised the liberating possibilities of and the relationship inherent between the poetic and travel. Lewis, while researching pre-instrumental traditions of navigation in central Australia, travelled with Pintupi elders on a journey of eight hundred kilometres through the Gibson Desert. In his book \textit{Shapes on the Wind} he noted that as they travelled, each of the elders would sing for a certain portion of the journey. Lewis said:

Every eighty kilometres or so a different man would be deferred to: we were passing through \textit{his} country; he would now be the one to lead the chants of power;\textsuperscript{62}

These chants that delineated a ‘sacred geography’ of travel were/are regarded as deeply powerful and dangerous as well as potent now, in this moment:

Each night around the campfire, with the sonorous cadence of a Gregorian chant, the great poem unfolded. Every riverbed and waterhole had its own memorable incident. I was not allowed to write notes, take photographs or tape-record during the singing. The song was so powerful that it was implicitly believed it would kill any woman or juvenile who accidentally overheard it.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 102.
As stated earlier, poetry derives from the Greek *poieo*, that is, ‘to make’ or ‘to create’.

Lewis encounters in his journey what may be the most prescient and powerful of ancient *poieo* we may be privileged to know. Travel, poetry and art are in the end a powerful mystery, ‘a making’; an action in this moment and in motion, the language of that power is also a mystery that we explore carefully as we make it, a *poieo*. The Pintupi elders were fully aware of the power of the ‘great poem’ and demonstrated this knowledge by singing their country into being. The artist-traveller has an opportunity to recognise in some way the power of the poetic language of their interior terrain and build on it. This is the start of ‘becoming-other’ and acceptance of being in motion, in the unique space of the journey, not concerned with departing or arriving but alive within the folds of the journey. This confirms Syed Manzurul Islam’s distinction between the sedentary and nomadic traveller as an effective tool for interrogating travel. The latter is a light touching movement within the folds of the land, acknowledging these spaces as inhabited by those who have their own stories and histories, legitimised within their own structures of understanding.

The journey of the exegesis

Initially in Chapter One, I will expand on my definition of travelling artists as a form of modern-nomadic existence, and explore the ramifications inherent in deciding to travel beyond one’s contextual boundaries into the fluid space of the journey, how one applies and what is a ‘nomad-strategy’. I will describe my life in Papua New Guinea and its influence on my subsequent development, finally culminating in this project.

Following on from this, in Chapter Two I will examine a significant project I co-initiated with Darwin artist Cath Bowdler. The NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER Project I collaborated in took place from 1993 to 1994. This project led me to travel extensively in central Australia as well as creating exhibitions in three sites: Darwin, Alice Springs and Sydney. This project changed both my life and my arts practice. I will also explore the

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65 Syed Manzurul Islam uses this term ‘becoming other’ to describe the process of change from sedentary to truly nomadic traveller and therefore beginning on the road to self-liberation.
impact travelling in Australia had on artist-nomad Ian Fairweather as he journeyed repeatedly across the continent. I will look at this through the lens of my own journeys through central Australia and along the Southern and Eastern seabords.

Chapter Three will explore theoretical constructions of the ‘other’, the concept’s growth and influence. I will outline the change possible in the relationship between an artist-traveller and those classified as ‘other’ through the positions of various authors.

In Chapter Four I will review my own experiences while travelling to Africa and China. I propose that a fundamental shift is needed for the traveller to escape the conquistador attitude towards the inhabitants of the unknown terrain. In this context, the relationship with the other becomes two-way and equal, an act of ‘becoming-other’, a self-liberation realised in the space of the journey. Journeys by Australian-based Joe Furlonger and Jun Chen, who travelled together through China, will be explored as well as the experiences of ethnologist James Clifford travelling through Central America.

Chapter Five, entitled ‘Rafts’, returns to Ian Fairweather’s raft voyage from Darwin to Roti Island in 1952. This extreme voyage, close to the edges of both death and madness, is where Fairweather burnt away much of the cultural/psychological baggage of his own past within his quixotic space of the journey. It is used to imply the mixture of both planning and chance encounter artists have used, to fully realise the nomadic experience of the road. In addition, I will explore the journeys of artists such as Michael Stevenson and Cordiera and Healy who have navigated the challenges of the journey.

In Chapter Six I will examine a powerful personal experience that took place in 1997 during a journey to the Riau Islands south of Singapore. While on a particular island Palau Battam, I came face to face with the Oraung Lau as they sailed past the resort I was then staying in. This was but one of a series of experiences I will bring together, from my personal interactions with the inhabitants of these islands.

Finally, I will review the issues and responses raised so far in this exegesis. This is not a
manifesto for or ideological position applicable to all travellers or all places. I do not propose a ‘how to’ of an aesthetic Lonely Planet. The artist-in-motion needs to be aware of and open to new and demanding situations from a necessary position of insightful humbleness, created from the act of travel. Travel can be disappointing, lonely and predictable if the traveller goes expecting to find familiarity in another’s terrain. The unexpected needs to be welcomed and embraced, and a good sense of humour is a useful tool when far from home and the crowds are pressing. The traveller must come to terms with leaving home and finding a new existence on the road.

The memories of such travels are the trace of change. Change exists within the interior psyche of the traveller and is the gift of travel, to be explored in all its ramifications. This is why no nomadic traveller could ever return to the same starting point and recognise it as ‘home’, because that place no longer exists. The challenge of return then is to recognise yourself as still in motion, even when this particular journey is over. Ultimately, I will argue that ‘becoming-other’ is the ongoing project of transforming liberation, the real core of the nomad-strategy, for the artist-traveller.
Fig. 2: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *The Wall* 1998, 1000mm x 1000mm, possession of the artist.
CHAPTER ONE: Nomad Strategies

... Man’s real home is not a house, but the Road, and that life itself is a journey to be walked on foot. 67
Bruce Chatwin

The writer and traveller Bruce Chatwin recognised the road as our real home; it follows then that existence can be a life in motion, not static or arrested in a particular locale but liberated, as the nomad is, to experience the unexpected every day. To realise the liberating possibilities of this state calls for a readiness to strip away the props of sedentary life. The traveller must be open to the new, to the unexpected pathways a journey may present. I look on painting in the same way, a journey that opens up unexpected side roads, as The Wall, my work from 1998 which prefaces this chapter, explores.

The painting below, Salt Road, explores these thoughts and draws on my own journeys, especially through central Australia and across the salt lakes of South Australia where the Stuart Highway traverses them. They are remnants of the great inland seas, ephemera that tease and beguile the traveller on their traverse of this continent.

Fig. 3: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Salt Road. 2009, 1400mm x 1800mm, acrylic on canvas, possession of the artist.

Travellers, tourists and nomads

Travel has a very old history and not all travel can or should be called ‘nomadic’. In the early part of this new millennium, travel has never been faster, cheaper or safer for any who have the resources to travel. Before the advent of the Grand Tour in the 16th century, pilgrimage was the accepted way to travel and not be seen as a dangerous vagabond or worse. Modern travel as we know it however starts with the phenomenon of the Grand Tour in the late 16th century, possible for only the rich, English aristocratic youth.


Ostensibly seen as a necessary educational pursuit for mostly male aristocrats of

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Britain, the tour, starting from southern Britain went on to Paris then to Italy and Rome. While it was educational, the tourists were frequently diverted by, in Matt Rosenberg’s words, ‘frivolous pursuits such as extensive drinking, gambling, and more intimate pursuits.’\(^69\) It was an education in more ways than one.

However the impact of the Grand Tour was undoubted, as it brought the infusion of Greco-Roman and European contemporary art, architecture and thought to northern Europe, Britain especially, though not exclusively. Scholar and writer Jean Sorabella outlines the impact of travel on such as Johann Winkelmann, author of the first major study of Greek and Hellenic Art, *The History of Ancient Art among the Greeks*, and pioneer of Art History and Archaeology.\(^70\) Further, many of the tourists brought with them artists such as Richard Wilson who travelled with the Earl of Dartmouth and painted Italian scenes for the Earl.\(^71\) They also returned with mementos, prints such as Canaletto’s Venetian scenes, and artefacts amounting to wholesale pillaging in the late 19th century, such as the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon.\(^72\) The influence of Italian architects such as Andrea Palladio had a lasting impact on English architecture through the Grand Tour and the taste for the neo-classical became well entrenched amongst the English aristocratic classes. The Grand Tour was halted by the French Revolution and when it revived, technology was on the way to changing travel itself.\(^73\)

Mass tourism, as we know it, begins in the burgeoning industrial age of the post-Napoleonic wars. It was one of the great technical, social and cultural achievements of the Victorian Age and continues to this day. Tourism now is a phenomenon organised on a global and industrial scale, which started as an attempt to bring the Temperance movement to middle and working class people of the


\(^{71}\) Ibid.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.

newly industrialised Britain of the 1820s. Thomas Cook realised in 1841 that he could use the newly expanding railway networks across Britain to link up with existing hotels in picturesque sites to offer the possibility of cheap transport and an organised hospitality to expand temperance as a movement into the new middle/working classes. From this grew the industry we know today and its impact globally cannot be ignored. Cook later went on to expand his company to an internationally operative enterprise and changed the very nature of travel. Cook used all the technological advances of the new age, as well as the expansion of the Western empires across the world – especially the British – to allow the newly wealthy middle classes of Britain access to places they had never imagined they would travel to.

Equally important was the impact this new freedom to travel had on those who travelled, as writer and lecturer in Tourism Tony Seaton points out:

Tourism today is today such a taken-for-granted practice that it is hard to imagine a time when it was not. It is no longer seen as an optional luxury, but a social imperative. This was not so in the generation before Victoria.

The full impact of mass tourism is beyond the scope of this inquiry, however Seaton does point to several areas that are worth reviewing as they have had a mass impact on the social fabric into today. The first is the legitimisation of tourism as a family activity through the activities of the Royal family and Queen Victoria herself, who popularised Scotland as her preferred destination. Hand-in-hand with this is the economic impact that mass travel had on not just those places visited, but also the manufacture of travel accoutrements extending to fashion. This has become an industry in itself. Finally, mass tourism brought to middle and working class women a surprisingly liberating space to explore both themselves

76 Ibid., 3.
and their world.\footnote{Ibid., 4.}

Seaton argues that the growth of travel created a hybrid space where women could escape the private/public domain expectations placed upon them, including sexual expectations. This window of opportunity allowed women to seek out and create for themselves spaces of creativity and ultimately gave some women a new voice outside the domestic sphere. The rules of romantic encounter were also different on tour. The opportunity to meet and mingle in the more casual atmosphere of trains, ships and hotels created the opportunity to meet strangers in a more fluid and fast-changing context than would exist in the more rigid confines of the home.\footnote{Ibid., 4.} Seaton notes that:

> Women hardly travelled before the nineteenth century. The Grand Tour was an all-male affair. The Victorian tourism boom acted as a form of empowerment, and it is no coincidence that by the end of the century scores of Victorian women had published travel books as Jane Robinson has usefully inventoried.\footnote{Ibid., 5.}

Yet if mass tourism offered and continues to offer travellers, under the protection of imperial armed forces, the opportunity to see the world, it also potentially reinforces the binary opposites of ‘them and us’. There is a great difference between the tourist and the nomad, modern or traditional: the tourist intends to return to a home somewhere else, while the nomad is at home in the space of the road wherever the road takes them, and it is as much a state of mind, an altered existence as it is a physical one. It is, as Chatwin asserts, ‘man’s real home’.\footnote{Bruce Chatwin, \textit{What am I doing here?} (UK: Picador, 1990), 273.}

Nomadic travel is to do with encounters with otherness that fracture both a boundary and an apparatus of representation. It is a performative act of becoming other. In the ethical sense, only nomadic travel deserves the name “Travel”.\footnote{Syed Manzurul Islam, \textit{The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka} (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), vii.}
Islam offers us a key strategy for a travelling artist, identifying the importance of the encounter between traveller and inhabitant in his first sentence. By challenging and fracturing the legitimacy of boundaries and the validity of representations which defines people as ‘other’, through the denial of the other’s voice, Islam gives us a way to flow from rigidity to unencumbered mobility. It is this mobility of both mind and body that can liberate the traveller, to truly experience the external and internal terrains of travel as informing one another. Now the individual traveller, no longer prisoner of the objectifying monologue enunciated by Edward Said,\textsuperscript{82} can experience the otherness present in all of us. It is in the liberation of the road, with its challenge to recognise and seize the moment of ‘becoming-other’, that the nomadic traveller can know transformation. Islam goes on to state:

Furthermore, nomadic travel offers a non-essentialist and a non-sedentary vision of living where dwelling and travelling merge into one another. And on the cross-cultural plane, nomadic travel also impels one to come face to face with the other, without the paranoia of othering that represents the other in relationship to oneself.\textsuperscript{83}

Here Islam contrasts the nomadic with a state of sedentary existence. Islam notes that true travel compels us to meet the other as equals. This offers the possibility of dialogue rather than monologue, not just with those with whom we travel but also ourselves. This is especially important; the true nomad is aware that the journey is not just external but interrogates our own internal journey.

Nomadism makes demands upon those who choose to follow this path. The nomad needs to be mobile and unencumbered by possessions. The nomad travels lightly, aware of sudden change and the possibilities offered to split boundaries that may hinder their way. To return to Islam’s definition of travellers:

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., vii.
If we were to explicate further the anatomy of the traveller, we could say that it is precisely in the very process of negotiating ‘the between’ traversing the threshold and crossing boundary, that s/he makes her/himself a traveller.\textsuperscript{84}

Islam is very clear on the power of the arbitrary boundary to impede journeys. Using the analogy of the walled city, Islam (citing Lewis Mumford) states that the very visibility of the walls connotes a power capable of regulating the lives of those inside, while defining those on the exterior as different, other, the dangerous nomad of legend.\textsuperscript{85} Islam goes on to use the analogy of the conquistador and his armoured, defensive posture, to describe the response of the inhabitants within the city walls to the ‘other’.

The nomad however, has the option of negotiating across boundaries. The nomads’ freedom of movement is their greatest possession and weapon. Wherever they rest is home, unbounded by any walls in an alternative space of their own devising. They are both vulnerable and empowered by their own ability to move laterally when they choose. The city makes itself powerful, by focusing all roads onto the city’s gates. The nomad offers an alternative to this. This is the nomads’ strategy: unexpected and unpredictable movement that challenges the validity of the boundaries to constrain their freedom of movement.\textsuperscript{86}

Artist can adopt a nomadic life and practise, such as those involved in site-specific projects as happens in Newcastle itself at the ‘Lock-Up Cultural Centre’ that has operated an artist-in-residence project since 2007.\textsuperscript{87} The current 2010 program for the centre, which works in conjunction with the John Painter Gallery as a site of intense cultural activity, has international artists and emerging artists in residency

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{87} The Lock-Up Cultural Centre, Newcastle, Australia. “Artist in Residence Program Calendar 2010,” \url{www.thelockup.info}
from the UK, USA, New Zealand as well as around Australia. When I was in conversation with Brisbane-based artist Tim Woodward, while attending his guest lecture at the University of Newcastle’s Department of Fine Arts on 3 March 2010, he acknowledged from his own experiences the problems faced in a site-specific practice involving travel. Woodward was quite aware of the issues, such as being in effect parachuted into a situation not your own, with people you are unfamiliar with, to develop art in unfamiliar spaces with narratives unfamiliar to you. Do you bring your own story or do you interact within the situation in front of you? There are no easy answers to these issues. Equally daunting is the folding of the space of the journey into a plane flight above, rather than a journey through whatever is below one. I have known this particular unnerving feeling myself, especially when involved in a residency program called ‘Corner Strategy’ that took me to Perth and Adelaide across the immensity of central Australia in 1993. However the first plane flight to Perth had a special relevance to me. The plane chased time and the sun across the continent, flaming bright ahead and deepest blue/black behind me; a drawing in my journal records the view, mostly the bright shining wing out the window and projecting into the void. It was while being involved in this project in 1992 that the first outline of ‘nomad-strategy’ as a name and a course of action appeared in my journal. At this juncture I was in Adelaide on the last leg of Corner Strategy and my first references to ‘Nomad-Strategies’ are grouped together with the comments concerning the whole progress of Corner Strategy. The project had been constantly bedevilled with conflicts between the collaborating artists, the art spaces who had initiated the project, and the project leader. Artistic collaboration I have found is always a series of ongoing negotiations of egos, resources, visions and ground rules, all of which are complex and occasionally confronting. In the midst of this I began to outline an installation that I wanted to call ‘Nomad-

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88 Ibid.
89 Personal conversation with artist-in-residence, Tim Woodward after the lecture at University of Newcastle, March 3, 2010.
90 I was involved in the ‘Corner Strategy Collaborative Project’ through the Northern Territory Contemporary for Contemporary Art (NTCCA) that brought eight regional artists into a very fraught collaboration within the confines of the contemporary Art spaces of Darwin, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide.
Nomad strategy, a beginning

At this point, a short digression into what constitutes a ‘nomad-strategy’ seems appropriate. The phrase had first appeared in my journal of 1992 while involved in the collaborative project called Corner Strategy. I was already interested in the development of language, from earlier studies of linguistics and cognitive development. I had, as an external student with the University of Queensland, undertaken some educational studies while in Papua New Guinea and had become interested in how language defines how and what we think and feel. The words ‘strategy’ and ‘nomad’ interested me because of their respective connotations. ‘Strategy’ has military overtones, yet the word has also become a concept one hears used in the art milieu. In my journal of 1992 I compiled words I associated with ‘strategy’, such as ‘command, planning, hordes, attack, security and found a question forming in my journal: ‘… if, when you adopt the language of power, do you then acquire the power it speaks of?’ 93 Similarly for ‘nomad’ I compiled words associated with it: mobility, tent, Tartar, Bugis, saddle, journey, and survival. Instead of a question, there was an observation: ‘… for the nomad, home is everywhere.’ 94

The project I envisaged to explore Nomad-Strategy would have used a lift in the Experimental Art Space of Adelaide, where our project was working and we held a final, fraught exhibition. I was proposing to place a sign outside the lift identifying it as a space of Nomad-Strategy, defining this small, mobile cubicle in the institution’s space as a nomadic one, going up and down. Inside would have been an instruction sheet and envelopes on each wall, with pictures and quotations from...
various military, political and religious leaders relating to their definitions of both ‘strategy’ and ‘nomads’, as well as images of both war and nomadic groups on the move. As the lift went up and down the participants could study these comments and images, comparing one to the other if they so wished, and then placing them back into the wall pouches. They would occupy the space for as long as they needed, but as it was a small space, participants would need to negotiate with each other about the time spent in it. It was a claustrophobic space in motion, as was Ian Fairweather’s raft, and the ‘strategy’ was to have the installation exist only for the duration of the exhibition, as did the raft, which was dismantled after the voyage though parts still exist on Roti island. I have some rough sketches of what I proposed but the project never eventuated. Occupational health and safety considerations intervened, but it would have been fascinating to have watched the reactions and hear comments from possible participants.95

In retrospect I am not sure if I had the raft in my mind at the time but I had already visited where Fairweather built it on the beach at Bullocky Point, Darwin. I had talked to several people such as Peter Spillett, who had seen the original and

Fig. 5: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Proposed installation sketch for Experimental Art Foundation using the lift. 1992, Artist journal from Corner Strategy project, possession of the artist.

95Ibid.
watched Fairweather drift out to sea after he launched it. The concept and application of a ‘nomad-strategy’ differs for the individual artist-nomad, the context and the time, for it is a short-lived phenomenon based on ‘being-there’, experiencing the moment and having a facility to adapt yourself to the situation. This involves a risk, there is no certainty and, as I have experienced, the process of the journey can be a fraught one. It was from this beginning that Nomad-Strategy claims an existence at least in my practice as an artist.

The Raft in this context of a ‘nomad-strategy’ should be seen in a different light, not as an isolated incident of an eccentric artist adrift from his moorings, but as a performative act totally in keeping with Fairweather’s strategic thinking. He was not attempting to get anywhere we would comprehend; rather the voyage was the destination in this sense, the quite logical conclusion to a long part of his development. For Fairweather Art was not an external process, but an exploration of being alive and freed from the shackles he perceived as grounding him on the reefs of his own past.

Fig. 6: Ian Fairweather. *Roti*, 1957, 483mm x 563mm, gouache on cardboard, private collection, Sydney. Murray Bail, ed. *Fairweather* Exhibition Catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, 1994, p. 37.

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96 I had a personal conversation with Peter Spillett about this time concerning Fairweather, in which he revealed that he was on the beach the night Fairweather launched the raft. It did not sail very well, rather it floated away.
Rather, Fairweather came to the realisation on the raft that his task was to explore the mystery of himself in relation to existence, a solitary exploration and an aspect of a mystery as deep as, and akin to the Eleusian mysteries of creation celebrated in Greece. This is a series of mysteries, involving pilgrimage, possibly ecstatic dancing, re-enactment of sacred stories and a world of extremely archaic yet apparently evolving chthonic myths and initiation rites to esoteric knowledge. The mystery evolved over two thousand years before being stopped by early Christians, but not before, in Edward Beach’s estimation, influencing the nature of the then evolving Christianity. I believe Fairweather realised that being there and in the moment is so profound and so complex as to be beyond conventional language and needing a personal language, and the struggle to create it would be his task. Fairweather’s act of creation, both by undertaking the Raft voyage and later in his hut on Bribie Island, painting in the half-gloom of lamplight, connected him to the most ancient performative ceremonies of sacred spirituality carried out in the womb-like cave/sanctuaries around the world. This is, I know, a completely different reading from Fairweather the ‘modernist’, but as a strategy, even if never articulated as such by the artist, it has important implications for how we ‘see’ him. Fairweather was not creating individual paintings, but rather, after the Raft, he pursued the realisation of a codex based on the origins of poetry, a poieo ‘to make’ an act of creation from the experience of living in the world, but not of it. Numerous commentators such as Murray Bail have said Fairweather worked on several works at once. This may be why they are joined as a language personal to himself and now as so much of the body of the work is scattered or lost, unfortunately as indecipherable as Linear A from ancient Crete which has baffled archaeologists since it was first recognised as a language. This is poetry as the

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98 Ibid., 10.
99 See image of Fairweather painting in his hut Chapter 5.
language of struggle and the tool of liberation.

The artist as nomad

The title of this inquiry posits the artist as a modern nomad developing and applying in their individual travels a ‘nomad-strategy’ to explore the ramifications of their progress. Nomad is used in this context as a secular description of the traveller. As the writer and long-term nomad-pilgrim Phil Cousineau points out, while many travellers took to the road as religious pilgrims, this is not the only way to pursue a spiritual journey. Secular artist-nomads can be on a path of spiritual growth, it is misleading to apply a narrow religious definition to this impulse for travel.103

The Artist-as-nomad is offered a choice: to separate from their habitual existence, the previous context of their life, through the act of travelling, or stay fixed in one spot, one context that is familiar. If the artist-traveller chooses the former option, they invite change, transformation both externally and internally into their existence. The journey therefore is as much concerned with moving internally as externally and developing a language capable of exploring this dual traversal of terrain. My own experience has taught me that without the act of ‘doing’ there is no art. Equally, dreaming of travel is not the same as travelling. You must be in the space of the journey, to find the meaning of the journey as well as the language to give meaning its form; they are the same.

I am not alone in this realization of being in the space of the journey, plus the potential cost. Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, while engaged in his project ‘In Search of the Miraculous’ attempted to sail a tiny yacht ‘Ocean Wave’ from the east coast of the USA, to Europe in 1975.104 Aden lost radio contact after three

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weeks and disappeared at sea. The risks of travel can be extreme for artists who push the boundaries, as Fairweather also did on his raft. Fairweather survived, just…Bas Jan Ader did not.

The artist-traveller can never return to the same context even if they return home, there is no stepping into the same river twice, as the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus stated. The spaces, places and times the artist-nomad moves through are not inert: they act upon the artist and the artist on them. Islam describes the change from a sedentary to nomadic traveller as occurring when the protagonist enters the process of ‘becoming-other’, that is, dissolving the boundaries between these two states of existence. The journey then becomes one that moves within rather than over the landscape and through boundaries. Enveloped in the possibility of change, chance, encounter and the excitement of coincidence, the artist-nomad can potentially, create new pathways for dialogue. It is a state of fluidity where every meeting is charged with possibility.

I have used the phrase ‘becoming-other’ from Syed Manzurul Islam to describe the transformatory process that may happen to the traveller. The French Marxist writer Henri Lefebvre also investigates something of the same ground using the term ‘both and also’ in a way similar to Islam. Lefebvre attempts to articulate the way one may move, from a strictly object-subject reading of contacts between individuals from different contexts. Instead Lefebvre gives us a starting point into a third space, a space of liberation. This conceptualisation of space can be imagined into existence, but it is a very different space from that normally conceived. The space of liberation is not defined by boundaries; it is not owned by anyone. This liberated space is made so by the creative activities within. Such a space may be short-lived, existing as an act of self-realisation for the artist-

105 Heraclitus of Ephesus circa 500 BCE. Heraclitus believed that all appearances and surface reality where in a state of flux, you cannot step into a river twice because the river has changed and you have changed in the instant of time between the first and second attempts to repeat the act.


107 Edward Soja links Lefebvre’s ‘both and also’ reading of the ‘third space trialectic’ as a crucial theory for political, social, cultural as well as personal change in a post-modern context of liberation. Lefebvre proposes this theoretical understanding in The Production of Space as quoted by Soja.
traveller, though other modern-nomads, intent on their own liberation, may well also create their own similar space. Instead of stasis, flow, motion and action are prerequisites for this conception of imaginary space. Above all it is not a space of stagnation: you are free to, and must eventually, move on. This space is one that is always coming into being and therefore infinite in its subtlety, not a space to hide in and defend. One could always imagine this space as an ellipse sliding smoothly between borders, splitting them without the defenders even aware that they are being undermined; it is a political as well as spiritual act.

These two concepts of space need to be explored by an artist-nomad in seeking a personal journey of liberation. In other words, it is a secular pilgrimage where the destination, is the creation of a space of self-liberation. This revolutionary act of liberation starts when one strips off the armour of the conquistador, as Islam noted.108 As an example, Ernesto Che Guevara turned his long journey through South America from travel account to poetic encounter with himself and his continent and began a transformation that grew into his revolutionary politics.109 Travel can be dangerous in more than just physical ways; you can come back a totally different person a revolutionary, as activist and writer Franz Fanon found.110 This is in contrast with the journey of the sedentary traveller, who moves without seeing or changing, though they may travel thousands of kilometres.

In my introduction I quoted at length from Syed Manzurul Islam’s description of the sedentary-traveller; the conquistador. He reminds us of the qualities of the sedentary traveller/conquistador: ‘… a conquistador moves in space, arrives at a different place. Yet bound by the pre-set goals they never leave the point of departure: they move folded in the inside.’111 The sedentary traveller then is distinguished by stasis, not in the distance they travel but the rigidity of their identity, sealed off from contagion by the unyielding nature of the boundaries that

confining them in the airless space of their imaginary armour. The conquistadors may imagine themselves invincible; however chance encounters with life may surprise them.

I was a practising artist as well as teacher, while living and travelling outside Australia. In Singapore especially, I met and worked with a wide variety of local and international artists who moved around the world regularly. Equally, some did not; it would be a mistake to assume that external, physical movement is the only measure of internal travel. Travel and the space of the road can exist within, indeed it must, to truly differentiate between the sedentary and nomadic traveller as those truly nomadic are travelling simultaneously, internally and externally.

I started travelling in my mid-twenties; the impulse however, had been with me from an early age. I believe it became manifest about the same time I realised just how much I was drawn to painting, and the two have remained for me, entwined ever since. My first travels, apart from with my family as a child, took me up and down the Australian east coast, surfing, sailing and painting. I travelled to Queensland in 1983, living on a small yacht, cruising amongst the reefs and islands. Since then I have lived in Papua New Guinea for two years, the Northern Territory for ten years and Singapore for three years. I have travelled in Africa, the western Pacific and Asia as well as throughout Australia. Until my return to Australia and Newcastle in 2001, I had not had a permanent home. I am not alone. Many artists through time have constantly been on the move, from Leonardo da Vinci to Ian Fairweather.

Without knowing it, I had myself become something of a nomad-artist. I was not yet aware of just how many people made travelling, the road, their true home as modern nomads. Restlessness runs as a secret history of motion under the surface of our culture and society. This can be seen by the growth of retreats and alternative spiritual projects such as the Sahara Walk Project, in which participants walk into the desert to experience, in collaboration with Tuareg guides, the deep
silence and majesty of the Sahara Desert.\textsuperscript{112}

Nomadism may appear a romantic dream or escapist fantasy. Yet many individuals now identify with modern nomadic groups, such as new age travellers, cruising sailors, grey nomads, artists and professionals.\textsuperscript{113} They share with the traditional nomad at least one trait, the need to travel light and unburdened with material or cultural accoutrements. These loose groupings have incorporated aspects of the nomadic life into an evolving understanding of the term. Recent research by sociologist Dr Ruth Hill Useem into the phenomenon of Third Culture Kids (TCK) has indicated the extent to which one form of modern nomadism, linked to employment of certain categories of specialists such as security, military and IT fields around the world, affects the children of these mobile professionals in our post-industrial world.\textsuperscript{114} For these individuals and groups of modern nomads borders mean very little; movement is an integral part of existence going from site to site, engagement to engagement. It may well be that it is the offspring of these highly trained fixers of the globalised systems that may, unintentionally, become modern nomads. It is they who have the possibility of day-to-day interaction with the local gardener, local kids, local shop-owners and the ever-present servants in the well-to-do expatriate homes. The original ‘home’ may become a very hazy memory and such children may well identify with many other cultures before their own. My own experience teaching such children in the Canadian International School, Singapore, reinforces this view!\textsuperscript{115}

An additional factor in the phenomenon of modern nomadism is the growth of the World Wide Web, connecting in virtual space highly diverse networks of participants who may never see each other physically.\textsuperscript{116} These connections of

\textsuperscript{114} Ruth Hill Useem, *Third Culture Kids the Experience of Growing up amongst Worlds.*
\textsuperscript{115} In 1999 I taught Visual Art in the Canadian International School, Singapore after parting company with the Singaporean education system. The student body was largely made up of expatriate students from around the world and I taught this diverse group a Canadian based Visual Art curriculum; it was not only the students who had challenges to their identities.
\textsuperscript{116} Tsugio Makimoto & David Manners, *Digital Nomad* (UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1997).
disparate groups add another layer of richness to the experience of the road and
could be viewed as a new manifestation of a nomadic existence. Even for those
paused in their travelling, such as myself at this stage in my life, the Web offers a
way to interconnect with travellers and dream of the day I may return to the sea.

Modern manifestations of nomadism are different from the traditional nomadism of
herder tribes and hunter-gatherers. This is a way of life which is seriously under
threat around the world. Traditional nomads, such as the Sea Gypsies (also called
Bajau Laut or Orang Laut) of the South East Asian archipelago live hard,
precarious lives, as writer Sebastian Hope found when he travelled with a family of
Sea Gypsies. The Bajau Laut face persecution for their nomadic border crossings
from various governments, trying to make them settle in one place.\textsuperscript{117} Also,
pressure on traditional fishing grounds threatens fish stocks already severely
depleted. The Orang Laut face attacks by other fishing groups, and violence has
been used against them as well.\textsuperscript{118}

As stated, the Sea Gypsies also face attempts by national governments to make
them stay in one place as well as move to less desirable areas. This had happened
in Singapore, with Orang Laut living in the Seletar Islands and the Kallang river
estuary before being settled or moving on, as Sebastian Hope relates.\textsuperscript{119} In the
Riau islands to the south, I encountered the Orang Lau people who are still living on
their boats and follow a hunter-gatherer existence, periodically in sight of the high-
rise towers of Singapore, their former home base.

Hope chronicles the difficulties of the Sea Gypsies’ existence.\textsuperscript{120} From Myanmar
to Kalimantan the same story of persecution has been played out. Ethnologists and
writers Fritz Trupp and Robert Schmid, in their survey of tribal groupings from
Arabia to Tanimbar in Indonesia as well as the nomad tribes of central and

\textsuperscript{117} Sebastian Hope, \textit{Outcasts of the Islands, the Sea Gypsies of South East Asia} (UK: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 169-171.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 29-30.
northern Asia entitled *Tribal Asia Ceremonies, Rituals and Dress*\(^\text{121}\), also chronicle the increasingly precarious state of tribal and nomadic groups. Such diverse groups have exceedingly rich cultural, spiritual and material lives, though only if one sees living on what one may gather and use, raw and locally modified products rather than wholly absorbed into the modern industrial system, as a viable basis for survival. The authors mention the Oran Laut as part of the great mix of unique tribal peoples throughout the south East Asian Archipelago.\(^\text{122}\) They along with so many ‘others’ are caught in what Trupp and Schmid describe as a constant drive by authorities to crush the tribes and make them conform. As the authors say:

> Abuse of traditional tribal cultures is ubiquitous on the islands of Indonesia. The drive to conformity brings about economic dependency and embitterment in the tribal people, who have no option but to wear the prescribed Islamic headwear or Christian clothing if they are not to be marginalized even further. But it is now very late in the day, as Christian missionaries, Muslim zealots and the Indonesian government have already been largely successful in breaking the back of the Malay archipelago’s traditional tribal cultures.\(^\text{123}\)

Paradoxically, nomadism still holds an allure for me that is more than simple romanticism; it is a liberated alternative to life behind walls. However, nomadism is also an example of lives lived within the folds of the land that is increasingly at risk. The cost of this loss is incalculable to our market driven, trans-national, trans-cultural lives, as Sebastian Hope and the other authors quoted indicate.\(^\text{124}\) What is a romantic impulse for me is a life-and-death struggle, a whole way of interacting with the earth we share, and we are the losers if it disappears under concrete, becoming just interesting artefacts in the museum cabinets of forgotten people. It is not just a sad fate for a handful of marginal cultures; it is a tragedy of such proportions that it will haunt us.

\(^\text{122}\) Ibid., 270.
\(^\text{123}\) Ibid., 269.
The sailor and writer David Lewis, as I mentioned in my introduction, describes the ‘great poem’ chanted by Pintupi elders as they traversed the Gibson Desert singing the land and its ancestors into being. If this great poem were to fall silent then our lives would be immeasurably shabbier and poorer. As will be related when I outline my life in Papua New Guinea, the interchange of experiences changed me profoundly. My poem of life really started to take shape there, in those steep mountains and amongst those still very tribal but surprisingly sophisticated people.

**A personal journey**

I became fascinated with travelling and the literature of travel early; the importance of movement over stasis for renewal became compelling as I discovered Archaeology at the University of Sydney. I found myself drawn to history of Magna Grecia, the Greek expansion and colonisation of the Mediterranean with particular interest. I was intrigued by questions of how colonisation affected both the coloniser and the colonised. I now recognise this as the starting point of the current project and an immersion in the fascinating history of travel.

From Archaeology to sailing; as I noted earlier I lived on a yacht and sailed it through the Great Barrier Reef for a year, in 1983. In this time I met and sailed in company with other sailors living on yachts, modern nomads from a wide variety of backgrounds who had consciously left land-bound existence for the uncertainties of a floating one. They were a disparate group of people; if they had anything in common it was an almost romantic dream to find viable alternative modes of life and live lightly on the move. Writer and researcher Jim Macbeth describes those who embrace such a life as developing an attitude of ‘positive deviance’, that is consciously choosing to move outside social norms and live a life in motion. My own ship's log of that voyage tells the story in terms of the technicalities of

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sailing; another personal diary explores my moods, people I met, situations encountered and the up and downs of a vagabond life. These sailors I sailed with were, in a sense, ‘sea people’ and I remember clearly just how dislocated and alienated I felt when I returned reluctantly to Sydney. What had felt like home no longer had that claim on me; it has never truly been my home since then.

I left to teach Expressive Art in Papua New Guinea (PNG), at the end of 1984. Being a teacher in Papua New Guinea meant I was not visiting, but living in a place unlike any I had ever experienced. There was a catch however, as frequently I found myself socialising, not with PNG nationals in their villages, but with other expatriates in expatriate enclaves because of language difficulties and personal confusion as to how to change the situation. I lived in the PNG government’s own idea of an enclave, a wire-fenced compound attached to the school in which I taught. By law I could speak only English, remaining monolingual in a multilingual culture and therefore emphatically ‘other’. This situation was challenged however, when I lived in isolated areas such as the village of Gumine in Chimbu Province, on the grounds of the school. Day-to-day life could not be sustained, except by learning at least some Pidgin and ‘tok-place’, the local dialect. Gradually my social contacts changed as language and familiarity with the Gumine population grew. I still found myself between worlds however, and on reflection it was perhaps not possible to imagine anything else. The gap between our experiences, language and contexts was always a factor. However, with humour and tolerance of my fumbling attempts to inter-relate, the Highlanders became used to me and included this schoolteacher in their everyday lives at least partly. My time in PNG provided me with another lesson: I began to keep a regular Artist journal and learnt its value.

127 Mark Elliot-Ranken, Ship’s log of the yacht Dursu Usarla, 1983, and my personal diary of the time, possession of the author.
Journals

In PNG I lost my camera, becoming reliant instead on small paint sets and journals, finding them much less intrusive than the singular eye of the lens. There are ten journals plus sundry sketchbooks, a small paint box with a few brushes, and a Chinese ink stone with the blocks of ink to grind onto it. The journals, full of drawings, notes, clippings and writings, are the evidence of a recently peripatetic life. I constantly refer to them; through the pictures and writings the context of their creation becomes manifest. The journals also confront me with the breadth of my own ignorance outside the bubble of my then largely Anglo-Australian existence. My life until my mid-twenties was a monologue of suburbia from the northern beaches of Sydney. I had never met an Indigenous Australian and, just as rarely, any non-Euro/Australians. The journals track the frequently bumpy ride to realisation of just how limited my horizons were and, hopefully, how they and I have changed; this is the personal transformation I embraced. As I look through the shifting images of my own travels in the journals, they frequently need translating by reference to my own memories that the journals trigger. Two parallel journeys were happening, I realised: one was external and the other internal – and between was a space of hybridisation of which I was only dimly aware. The journals now are both memory aids and a bridge to those worlds I have travelled through. They also lead to my own practice as an artist as I find my work in a constant state of transformation from paintings such a The Wall at the beginning of the Nomad Strategies chapter to Salt Road on the first page of the same chapter.

Though these two works, done ten years apart, initially appear very different, they are linked by my own experiences of travel. The Wall, painted in Singapore in 1998, uses an image of a rock spire from Litchfield Park I drew in the Northern Territory, the low coast of Australia I sailed along and the words used to describe

this continent as a place unoccupied, despite evidence to the contrary. I placed these visual signifiers of my travels onto a wall. It reminded me of the posters used to describe the Northern Territory to would-be Asian tourists whom the Territory tourist industry hoped would come to spend their dollars in our casinos. Ten years on, the visual clues of The Wall have gone in Salt Road but the message is the same: travel is not a game, it demands the commitment of the traveller to the act of travel, if that person wishes to truly ‘travel’.

One of the journals is different. This one is bigger, A2 size and is a studio journal, created in response to and as I painted my recent work in the studio.129 There are few words, just direct responses to the white paper. This journal has not travelled except into the act of painting; the mark-making is a constantly evolving language of the here and now. This journal has a trajectory different from the other journals; it is a gate between the paintings and myself. All the responses are direct, with little reworking and no premeditation. I simply pick up whatever brush comes to hand and start. This reflects my work practice in the larger paintings as a pared-down process to the basics of my own creativity, and it is a different journey, an internal one with its own agenda. There is minimal reliance on the explanations of words, but maximum exploration of the act of mark-making cracking the white surface.

The other journals also have anomalies. Most of my later work is non-representational. No Highland Warrior has ever appeared in my work, despite the overwhelming impact Papua New Guinea has had on me. I have realised slowly that my use of ‘found’ objects in work comes almost directly from the Highlanders’ recycling of the detritus left by our colonial intrusion onto their context. Later in Darwin and Singapore, ‘found’ objects frequently appeared in my paintings, but this has slowly changed. Now such objects are incorporated into almost totemic wall assemblages such as First Contact: Bento, pictured below. This assemblage of objects, from the local sushi outlets, is a somewhat light-

129Mark Elliot-Ranken, Studio journal, 2009, possession of the artist.
hearted comment on how many of us first experience ‘other’ cultures … through our mouths!

Landscape also has had a strong influence on my work, both in the journals and my major paintings. The work of the last two years especially has winnowed even these persistent references to landscape out of my canvases and they have become gates to my own internal journey.

The journals then describe the slow and often tortuous transformation of my own art practice and personal journey, through the terrain of ‘other’, cultures that have had their cultural production labelled ‘primitive art’\(^\text{130}\). It this ongoing process of sorting, discarding, reinterpreting and creating something new that is the primary lesson of my journals, not just the images of where I have been. In this context, the journals constitute my longest work in progress, and it has not stopped yet! I do not need images painted by me to remember the Papua New Guinea Highlands, just memories incorporated into my journals. My debt to the Highlanders comes from the lesson they provided me with, that is to constantly adapt to the challenges of our modern life, through translation of the experiences of travel, into the contexts

of one’s own existence now.

The translator is akin to the traveller in this context, a point James Clifford explores in his essay ‘Travelling Cultures’. Journeys tend to leave few monuments or indeed physical traces; the remains are often found in images, words, text, memories, portable objects (souvenirs/mementoes) and in my case, images and writings in journals and paintings done later.

However there are dangers in translation. While words and sounds may be translated, interpreting the signs and signifiers from one cultural context to another is a much more difficult process. The artist-nomad needs to constantly be translating their own experiences, to have any hope of ‘becoming-other’ and not misreading the signs on the trail.

The writer and Taoist philosopher Stephen Hodge outlines the possibilities for mistranslation leading to misinterpretation, in his 2002 book, *Tao Te Ching* (Daodeching). The *Tao Te Ching* are ancient sets of commentaries on human behaviour, and are the basis for both a cosmology and philosophical underpinning of much of the traditional Chinese view of the world. The thoughts of Laozi (Lao Tse), the possibly mythical founder of the school, caught the imagination of early European travellers to China. The book *Tao Te Ching* (the Book of Changes) was translated to become influential in many circles in Europe and America. Yet those early translations created their own problems because, as Hodges states:

... there is one small problem: most popular translations fail to understand the intellectual environment and intentions of the people who originally compiled the sayings and this has caused misunderstandings and misinterpretation. Even to translate dao as “the Way” is probably inaccurate... 

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131 James Clifford, *Routes Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 7.
Hodges goes on to say that key concepts such as ‘wu-wei’ (non-action) have probably been misunderstood because of the enormous difficulties of translating from symbol-based texts such as Chinese to phonetic-based European languages. The very conceptualisation of the ‘Way’ has become confused by translation. To read the ‘Way’ as a path is to incorrectly interpret the symbolism of spaces by creating unneeded boundaries and edges. It is not a road but a multidimensional state of mind, an imagining of alternatives beyond any simple binary constructions. The nomad-artist liberated from the context of departure, following the nomad spoor can enter this space through a shedding of accumulated suppositions.

Yet while the road is alluring it also involves a loss. To leave the familiar, one’s home, can be a wrenching experience. One leaves the relationships of a lifetime; those formed on the road are different, because the road is a space all to itself, unique. But it is not an uninhabited void; others are there and that contact, if one allows it, can change the individual.

Other travellers and the communities travelled through are your constant companions. These connections on the road are sometimes necessarily brief, but not insignificant. They are made in movement, touching and parting. This is the condition of travel, as Phil Cousineau explains: ‘… always, it is a journey of risk and renewal. For a journey without challenge has no meaning; one without purpose has no soul.’

Above all, the space of a journey is unique; each has its own context and references the experiences of the traveller alone. No one can travel another’s path even if walking beside them on the same road. Writers such as Phil Cousineau, Alain de Botton, Syed Manzurul Islam and James Clifford all emphasise this aspect of travel. Chatwin makes it a central tenet of much of his

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135 Ibid., xxiii.
writing. Artist Ian Fairweather dedicated, as I will explore later, a lifetime to following this highly spiritual way. The journey is almost always through an occupied zone of ‘others’; we are not the discoverers of unknown lands except in ourselves and must be aware of this, if we wish to truly travel.

The journey deceives us; it may appear as a road with boundaries to define our progress and keep us on the ‘straight and narrow’. Yet as I noted earlier in this chapter, the ‘Way’ cannot be imagined as singular and defined but multidimensional. My art, my painting is for me, a ‘Way’, that is, a moving site of creativity, in which the language of that creativity, is explored. It is a very personal space and as I write this, I am aware that just possibly a long apprenticeship is ending and a personal liberation has begun.

**Papua New Guinea**

As stated, in 1984 I was employed to teach Expressive Arts to secondary boarding school students in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG) for two years (1985-86). The experiences of this period are with me still. There was a sense of frustration when I returned to Sydney, trying to explain to friends and family just what I had experienced. How do you explain to someone the experience of being surrounded by a thousand armed warriors, on the way to do battle with another clan? Some of the warriors stopped and asked me about the progress of their child, in the school I taught at. This is the enigma of travel. A gap of experience exists between oneself and friends that conventional language, no matter how persuasive, cannot bridge unless the participants have shared something of the same experiences. There is an intensity lost, a draining of meaning from being elemental and life changing, to merely exotic stories of the traveller brought back to suburbia. Papua New Guinea challenged me, with an extraordinary sense of disconnection and unity all at the same time. It would need a different language of painting on

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137 Bruce Chatwin has several books on aspects of travel, written on the basis of his almost perpetual travelling on almost every continent.

my part, to conceptualise just how extraordinary this time was in my life.

In those two years I travelled along the spine of the land on the Highlands Highway, to the Markham Valley and on to Madang. I painted on hillsides, surrounded by every villager within running distance, and would hear the call to come and look at what the strange white man was doing on their hill with their view. Always the interaction was as exciting as the view. I drew and photographed the great gatherings of tribal people in such places as the biannual Goroka Show. 139 As well, I saw Pope John Paul II’s punishing journey through the Highlands to a meeting of an estimated five hundred thousand Highlanders at Mount Hargan in 1984.140 I held my first solo exhibition at the Goroka Museum in 1985.

This exhibition at the Goroka Museum had important consequences in my development as an artist. As I worked on the hills painting the landscapes of the places I visited, I gradually began to question the language of those conventional painted responses to the Highlands. Indeed the best of my works came about in the most difficult situations: rain and mud, pressure from those looking over my shoulder and the language of their response that I could not understand. The exhibition did not have one conventional figurative or landscape-based work. Instead, the works became quite abstract, the language of illusionist landscape increasingly incapable of expressing the experiences and physiological development I found myself discovering. In this exhibition I began to see a glimmer of the way out of my painterly conundrum: I would need to create a new and highly flexible language for myself, akin to Pidgin, the lingua franca of PNG. Pidgin as I experienced it, is very flexible on structure, highly nuanced in its vocabulary and capable of evolving to meet newly arising situations, hybridising itself with great rapidity.141 I found a new and flexible creative space of my own making waiting for me in this developing visual language. I have been exploring

139 The photographs are still in my possession though a number of the sketches disappeared in transit form PNG.
140 Ibid.
141 More than once I reduced listeners to helpless mirth while trying to master Pidgin especially in the Highlands where the language is still evolving and hybridising as layers of change come to remote villages.
this liberating, creative space ever since.

In the Markham Valley I photographed and collected artefacts and sat with the potters in the mud of Zuming, the great ceramics centre, coming away with malaria as well as the pots I bought. I watched the women hand-build pots whose shapes and designs have been found across South-East Asia and the western Pacific for centuries, echoing the Lapita style ceramics of early voyagers. Geoffrey Irwin, in his study of prehistoric colonisation of the Pacific, tentatively dates the appearance of Lapita and the proto-Polynesian expansion into the Pacific at c. 1500 BC.\textsuperscript{142}

Singsing decorations, such as those photographed below, are worn strapped to the backs of the dancers. I was shown the back-pieces in the photograph by students at Gumine High School and they were made in their village, as a communal effort to be discarded straight after.

![Fig. 8: Singsing dancers preparing decorations, Asaroka Valley PNG, 1985. Photo, collection of the author.](image)

\textsuperscript{142}Geoffrey Irwin, \textit{The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonization of the Pacific} (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 34.
One night in 1986 I was asked to attend a Singsing* in the Asoroka Valley in the Eastern Highlands near the town of Kainantu where I was then stationed. It rained and the night was black, and walking through the undergrowth, along rough, slippery paths to the Singsing enclosure, I watched rivers of fire descend from other villages over the hills. Participants donned their extraordinary costumes, often two metres high, painted and adorned with the reinvented cast-offs of the west amongst the smoke, rain, smells and pig shit of the host village.

The dancing lasted all night, as did the socialising and trading. Traditional and imported trade goods, such as pearl shell, feathers, the fur of cuscus (a small tree-dwelling marsupial) and weapons were exchanged for tobacco, beer, clothes and cars. Marriages were arranged, bride-price (in pigs, kina and blankets) exchanged, Feuds settled (for now) and payback* worked out, alliances strengthened and big-men enhanced their positions and influence.143

Fig. 9: Singsing, Asoroka Valley PNG, 1985. Photograph, collection of the author.

* A Singsing is a Pidgin word to describe a large, usually all-night dance accompanied by drums and chanting. Often it is organised to fund a bride-price or dowry.
* Payback describes the system by which a clan involved in a dispute with another clan can settle the offending problem by paying a negotiated amount.
143 These memories of the night come from myself, old notes from my earlier journals started in PNG and the photographs taken on the event in 1985. At the time I was employed as the Expressive Arts teacher, Kainantu Junior High School, Eastern Highlands Province.
I photographed and talked to the teacher who had invited me. I thought I was watching an age-old ceremony, but was quickly disabused of that naïve notion. According to my informant the missionaries had largely eradicated the old practices, even the memories of them. However, Highland travellers to the great Highlands festivals had seen the possibilities for making money from such displays. So the Asorokan Valley clans had borrowed from everywhere they could to build a hybrid culture of dance, decoration and exchange.

I was looking at an ancient tradition of cultural exchange. This was not a new process. The great trade networks, which cover both land and sea routes through Melanesia and beyond, had always been more than just concerned with trade objects. They were networks of exchange for the tangible and intangible, trade and creators of alliances between disparate clans and dynamic processes of change, yet the people still operated in a context of continuity, shared memory, history and language.144 The coming of missionaries such as Lehner and Pilhofer, gold prospectors such as the Leary Brothers in 1930 and 1933, using planes to penetrate as far as Mt Hagen, and government men (such as myself as a teacher), kiaps (patrol officers) had disrupted, but not extinguished, the great trade routes.145 The part colonisation of the Highlands had simply provided faster ways to synthesise new objects, ideas and methods of exchange, onto existing processes. Even as the missionaries believed they were saving souls, their messages of salvation were being transformed by the Highlanders themselves.

As educational writer and long-time PNG resident Brian Miller diplomatically says; ‘Missionary involvement has had a significant effect on development in the Highlands. Like most other contacts, the missions have brought both problems and benefits.’

Miller then presents us with a compelling visual image of a missionary in Goroka (Fig. 10) walking in a sandwich board with a passage from the Bible translated into the lingua franca of the Highlands, Pidgin. Though I had not seen this particular character, I had experienced encounters with similar individuals as I travelled through Goroka and the Highlands. The impact of missionaries was everywhere, however the people of the Highlands managed to assimilate these newcomers, while the missionaries thought they were saving pagan souls.

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146 Ibid., 70.
147 Ibid., fig. 126, 70.
Kainantu, where I lived, was in the Asoroka Valley and had an expatriate enclave built to emulate an American small town in the Highlands. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) worked here to translate the Bible into all the languages of PNG, six hundred of them. The SIL settlement and supermarket was well stocked with imported American goods. This cornucopia was open only to ‘saved’ locals, and expatriates such as myself (with a special pass). An enormous communications tower dominated this enclave, connecting the missionaries to the USA and, it was rumoured, the CIA – but that was only a rumour!

The British East India Company similarly used its factories as the foundations for later great centres of trade and control across India in the service of evolving capitalist and imperial plans. The writer E. M. Forster in his novel *A Passage to India* centres the whole narrative on such an enclave, highlighting the lack of communication between the surrounding Indian city and the fearful expatriates within.¹⁴⁸ Singapore and Darwin were planned as entrepots for expanding mercantile and physical empires. These enclaves can be micro-societies, utterly at odds and having as little contact as possible with their neighbours, the true inhabitants. To ultimately survive, such leftover colonial enclaves like the Greek colonial settlements in Magna Grecia need to evolve or wither away.¹⁴⁹ In the same vein, the relationship of settler Australia to Australia, the land and Indigenous inhabitants, is a constantly shifting negotiation between two utterly different cultures. Travelling in the occupied spaces of other cultures here has always, from the time of the first explorers, been a problematic experience, for they came to settle and acquire, not remain in motion. I will look in the next chapter, at a significant journey through central Australia that I undertook in 1993, as well as the experiences of other Australian artists who came before.

¹⁴⁹ Magna Grecia describes the area bordering the Mediterranean Sea settled by Greek colonists leaving overcrowded city-states in Greece itself. This extended from Southern France to the Black Sea.
Fig. 11: Northern Territory Map, NT Government.
CHAPTER TWO: Footprints

We are modern nomads who have never known what it is to have an abiding home. Our lives are measured by a litany of departures, travelling from want to want, consuming distances and countries like a junkie.\(^\text{150}\)

Kim Chen Boey

As the Singaporean writer and traveller Kim Cheng Boey states, home is a fluid concept to the nomadic traveller; it is where you are now. The quote I have used is a particularly poignant passage in Kim’s book *Between Stations*, written a decade after the author left his homeland of Singapore in 1997. Kim travelled for a year through India, China and the Middle-East to Egypt and Morocco, before coming to his new ‘home’ in Newcastle as a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Newcastle University, where I am undertaking this PhD. Curiously the year Kim left Singapore I arrived in Singapore, to start a difficult three-year contract with the Singaporean Ministry of Education. Many of the places Kim describes in his book were still just surviving when I was resident, though, as Kim observes, the ‘Lion City’ was busily reshaping itself as I watched.\(^\text{151}\)

In this chapter I will explore the nomad-artist’s relationship with those places we call ‘home’. Further I will explore my own journeys, especially my final leave-taking from Darwin that had become my home for eight years, from 1986 to 1994. This was through the travelling art project called the NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER Project and at the end of it I remained in Sydney, my original home though this for me remains a problematic thought. Finally I will explore Ian Fairweather’s fluid relationships with the communities he resided in, until he settled on Bribie Island just off the north coast of Moreton Bay in Queensland.

The NEVER NEVER Journey


\(^{151}\) Ibid.
From 1992 to 1994, while living in Darwin, Capital of the Northern Territory (NT), I was involved in a collaborative series of exhibitions with another Darwin artist, Cath Bowdler. We called the collaboration the ‘NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER’ Project and based it on our personal experiences of internal emigration from Sydney to Darwin. The ‘Never Never’ is the term used to describe the outback regions of north Australia, and is the title of the famous book *We of the Never-Never* by Jeannie Gunn, concerning life on Elsey Station, an early cattle station at Mataranka south of Darwin in 1902. The book’s author was the wife of the station’s owner Aeneas Gunn and came from ‘the south’ to live an extremely isolated life on the edge of the colonial experiment of the Northern Territory. This narrative, like so many others in the history of the ‘Top End’, speaks of the hope to tame the country, make it productive and ‘civilise’ the Indigenous inhabitants. The territory however remains resistant to this trope even today. The NT has a history of failed attempts, such as the Humpty Doo Rice Project of 1956-60, to make a profit and mould the land and the Indigenous Australians to an imposed model of capitalist development. The ‘territory’ however retains the faraway exotic draw as a romantic and exotic destination, for equally exotic travellers and the NT Tourist industry uses this to relentlessly market north Australia to potential tourists.

The name for our project grew out of the famous international campaign ‘You’ll never never know if you never never go’, a promotion from 1992 which subsequently developed into the ‘Neverland’ promotion of 2003. The later invoked the Peter Pan-like feeling of a faraway, exotic place of mystery, fantasy and adventure to restore a declining industry, tourism, in the face of rising oil prices and travel costs. Cath Bowdler and I had met in Darwin in the early 1990s, at the then Northern Territory University School of Visual Arts (now

152 Mrs Aeneas Gunn, *We of the Never Never* (Australia: Hutchinson, 1977).
154 Dr Caroline Winter and Dr Karey Harrison: “Crocodiles and Oil Prices: Northern Territory tourism as the ‘canary in the coal mine’ for global tourism,” 4th International Symposium on Aspects of Tourism, University of Brighton at Eastbourne, UK 2005, [nt.gov/ntt/financial/budget04-05/](http://nt.gov/ntt/financial/budget04-05/)
155 Ibid., 13.
Charles Darwin University). We were both from Sydney and, by chance had both been ex-teachers of visual arts in the secondary schools systems of New South Wales. Now as Master of Arts candidates in the postgraduate program of the School of Visual Arts we were both equally fascinated by the exotic and extraordinary environmental, personal and cultural aspects of our new home. In short our collaborative project grew from chance encounters in our individual lives in the Northern Territory.

Our stated aim in the project was to create dialogue between the ‘far north’ and our former home, Sydney. In our joint essay ‘Point of Departure’ we stated:

Both of us have lived in north Australia for a considerable period. What was once ‘exotic/frontier’ is now, to an extent … familiar/home. Yet for us Sydney was our point of departure. We now work in this space that is divergent and have felt it imperative, as artists, to establish dialogues between the far north, often defined as peripheral, and the metropolis from which we came.156

Mark Elliot-Ranken, Cath Bowdler

We travelled the project from Darwin after an exhibition at 24H Art Gallery, Parap, Darwin to Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs, and finally to First Draft Gallery, Sydney. At the end of the journey we realised that our stated objective was near impossible; if any dialogue was started then it was short-lived. What was achieved however, was unexpected. I began the process of building on the liberating experience of the journey. Just how liberating this was became apparent to me on my own long drive back to Sydney via Alice Springs, Uluru, Adelaide and Melbourne. After ten years in Darwin, I returned to Sydney, which had been but no longer felt like home. The project also created the opportunity to travel extensively in the ‘Tropical Top End’ and the dry ‘Centre’ experiencing again, before I left the unique allure of the north.

As research for the project, in 1993 with a companion, artist Ken Burridge, I undertook a journey from Darwin to Alice Springs and back. I was ‘exploring’ – or so I presumed to imagine. This journey turned into a truly significant journey for me, as I found myself coming aware of the struggle for control of the most precious resource of the dry centre, water. Eventually the journal entries coalesced into my catalogue essay ‘Exploration of the Known Route’ (see Appendix One). On the Stuart Highway in the company of other travellers, I began to immerse myself in the liberating qualities of travel, especially the freedom of apparently limitless movement and the time to appreciate the experience. Home, on my journeys down the central spine of the Northern Territory, became a van, sleeping bag and memories.

In my time in the NT, I became fascinated by the search for the ‘inland sea’, the mythical waterway to the heart of Australia proposed by Surveyor-general John
Oxley after his 1818 expedition from Sydney. Subsequently, the former East Indian Army Officer Thomas J. Maslen presented in his book *A Friend of Australia* a map purporting to show not only the ‘sea’ but also an immense river running from north-western Australia into the centre, somewhere on the Queensland Northern Territory border. The inland sea’s existence only became a ‘myth’ after Charles Sturt’s expedition of 1848; Sturt dragged a whale-boat into the extremely dry heart of the continent, only to abandon it on his desperate return. As you leave Darwin the land appears moist and green; that in itself is a deception. The soil is dry and lacks basic nutrients to sustain agriculture.

My own 1993 journey reinforced the deceptive quality of Northern Australia, evident from Darwin to Mataranka. The land can appear very fertile, as John McDouall Stuart reported in his successful third expedition across central Australia to the northern coast near Darwin in 1862. Stuart’s reports of large swathes of fertile land led to the assumption that has beset attitudes to North Australia, that it is a northern cornucopia waiting for development. At the conclusion of his third and successful expedition that reached the northern coast of Australia, Stuart wrote in his journal:

> In conclusion I beg to say, that I believe this country (i.e., from the Roper to the Adelaide and thence to the shores of the Gulf) to be well adapted for the settlement of an European population, the climate being in every respect suitable, and the surrounding country of excellent quality and of great extent.

Stuart’s observations as to the quality of the land led to South Australia acquiring the Northern Territory until ceded to the Commonwealth of Australia after

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Federation in 1911. However, today the Northern Territory is recognised as having a very fragile environment. ‘The soils of the Northern Territory are generally low in nutrient value resulting in low nutrient pasture;’ The apparent abundance which Stuart praised has proved to be a chimera, to the cost of many who thought to make the north of Australia an agricultural land.

When you live in the ‘Top End’ for a period of time, water or the lack becomes an obsession. The wet season, from December to May, is all about too much water – and the dry, June to November, wishing for it. Mataranka, near where Elsey Station was situated, has bubbling, crystal blue hot springs. Further inland things become much dryer: at Larrimah it is all tanks and dust. Indeed elevated water tanks, bores, dry watercourses and old stock route waterholes become a constant feature of the land. The highway roughly follows some of the explorer John McDouall Stuart’s own path, as well as the first overland telegraph line. The highway dissects Indigenous routes going from waterhole to borehole to dry riverbed. A glance at the map will indicate where the settlers stopped and claimed living space; almost are on a watercourse, spring or bore hole.

Control of water means control of the country, as both white colonists and Indigenous defenders knew. As stated, all the towns such as Elliott, Rainer Springs and Newcastle Waters are founded around water places. My journal refers to control and domination of water as the prerequisite for power and survival. Graphic memories for me abound: dead donkeys and dying horses outside Tennant Creek, a community of intense racial tension. At Devils Marbles we camped under the stars, attempting to make sense of this trip and this land.

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167 I have driven through Tennant Creek several times and the racial tension of this town always feels me with unease. The dead donkeys and dying horses were on the town outskirts next to and sprawled on the Stuart Highway.
Waters is built beside a swamp, on a dry salt lake that fills each wet season. The wet cuts the Stuart Highway for weeks here, despite a series of long bridges to allow the floodwaters through.

As I mention in my catalogue essay, it is projected that 50,000 people will live one day at Alice Springs next to the unpredictable Todd River. However Alice’s water supply comes from the Roe Creek bore field that taps into the Amadeus Basin. It is a long way outside the town, and since the field’s construction the water table has dropped sixty metres in the basin, making the water both difficult to get and very expensive to maintain. The artesian field is being pumped out at a faster rate than it can refill, and already it is concerning inhabitants of the arid town.

At the time of the Never Never project I wrote for our catalogue: ‘This place is no longer an incident of history but a history of accidents that have happened, a series of ill-fitting fragments which rub and create, what …’ The end of the essay I left deliberately vague as an unfinished journey that has left questions for me. Rereading my journals of the period I have found constant references to travel, nomadism and the lure of the journey, but only occasionally to the idea of home. This concept had little import in my life then or now and, as Kim Cheng Boey points out, the true modern nomads are characterised as ‘no fixed address’ in both attitude and reality. In this space the potential of travelling begins to reveal itself as a liberating experience. Fertile encounters invariably continue/d to happen; casual meetings, the sharing of the particular space of the journey allow an exploration of individual experiences and the development of the personal languages to creatively engage those memories. The narratives of individual travellers start to cross and interweave, allowing the possibility of creative and

169 Department of Natural Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport, “Where does Alice Springs get its water from,” www.nt.gov.au (accessed April 5, 2010).
171 Ibid.
172 Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artists Journals 1990-2010, possession of the artist.
liberating moments to appear unencumbered by thoughts of return to a home already in and of the past.

It is a ‘Known Route’ yet distinct, unique to each traveller, as James Clifford alludes to in his essay, ‘White Ethnicity’.\textsuperscript{174} Clifford weaves together several apparently unrelated narratives of travel, investigating the process of remembering. The creation of memory is a complex process as the voices of the protagonists, from the heroic to the everyday urban traveller, bounce off one another. They are the ill-fitting fragments of unrelated, yet interweaving personal narratives, a meeting of ghosts\textsuperscript{175}. These are parallel paths in the interior and exterior progress we embark on, emphasising the nomad as ‘other’.

One artist is of particular importance to me, the Scottish-born, world-travelling Ian Fairweather. Fairweather travelled relentlessly after leaving England in the early ’20s. Indeed his whole life could be said to have been a long, arduous ‘travail’, which as Phil Cousineau says, is the original meaning of the word ‘travel’, an ordeal to be endured.\textsuperscript{176} The artist kept travelling extensively in Australia, until finally arriving in Darwin in late 1951 and subsequently undertaking the sea voyage by raft that, in the popular imagination, made him famous.\textsuperscript{177}

\textbf{Interior journeys of Ian Fairweather}

In my introduction, I suggested that travel offers the possibility of self-liberation through movement and a connection to the inner terrain of our many-layered consciousness. I propose that this may become a reality by finding a way to, in Syed Manzurul Islam’s understanding, ‘become-other’.\textsuperscript{178} That is, discovering for oneself a mode of travel that necessitates a stripping away of the pre-conceptual baggage we all carry from our contextual starting point to uncover ourselves. The

\textsuperscript{174} James Clifford, \textit{Routes} (Cambridge Massachusetts USA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 92-104.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Phil Cousineau, \textit{The Art of Pilgrimage} (USA: MJF Books, 1998), 9.
\textsuperscript{177} Murray Bail, \textit{Ian Fairweather} (Australia: Bay Books, 1981), 90.
\textsuperscript{178} Syed Manzurul Islam, \textit{Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka} (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996).
Greek poet Constantine Cavafy in his poem ‘Ithaca’ suggests we travel long and lightly not expecting the destination to be the reward for our efforts. Instead, it is the opening to our interior spaces that are the reward of the journey and for the artist-nomad, our true home. Phil Cousineau quotes Lawrence Durrell on this point. Durrell describes a traveller as an introspective, advancing outwardly while exploring her own inner world simultaneously, indeed liberated from any exterior place and at home in the space of the journey.

I’m danged if I can make head or tail of the past either – that journey to Timor … such a mystery hangs over the whole affair.

Ian Fairweather wrote this summing up of his own desperate raft voyage from Darwin to Roti Island off Timor in 1952. This was travel as ‘travail’ as Cousineau would understand it. In this short statement he acknowledged the mysterious quality of this episode that affected all his subsequent work as he turned to the project of examining his own life and travels. The raft voyage was the transforming event for Fairweather. The raft voyage exemplifies Fairweather’s determination to overcome all obstacles presented by the material, not spiritual impoverishment that characterised his pursuit of painting, as an act of deep significance to himself.

As stated earlier, in Australia Fairweather travelled long distances and mixed with a wide variety of people, from the bourgeoisie of Melbourne, to the disenfranchised Indigenous inhabitants of north Queensland. Fairweather’s comments emphasises the mystery he felt when confronting his own journeys. His whole enigmatic life, not just the raft voyage, did not lend itself to an easy

185 Murray Bail, Fairweather (Australia: Murdoch, 2008).
understanding as it was outside what many would comprehend as ‘a life’. After the raft voyage, Murray Bail states, Fairweather made his own life the subject of his work. Fairweather created a body of paintings, in both semi-figurative and purely abstract methodologies to explore himself and his experiences where the inner and exterior world began to merge.

Fairweather first landed in Fremantle, after living in Canada, China, the Philippines and Bali in 1934. He soon moved to Melbourne and while there, he was in contact with influential figures such as Lina Bryans and those who saw themselves advancing the cause of contemporary visual art, in the conservative atmosphere of inter-war Australia. As Murray Bail says, ‘Here where the flower arrangements in Toorak homes were listed in detail in the social pages, a bookseller who displayed Michelangelo or Modigliani reproductions would be prosecuted.’ This captures the atmosphere of Melbourne in this period of 1934. Fairweather appears to have suffered increasing depression in facing this bleak atmosphere. Murray Bail suggests that Fairweather may have been suffering from the onset of schizophrenia as early as 1918, brought on from his First World War experiences as a prisoner. His meeting with the leading figures of the modernist art movement in Melbourne working in opposition to this deadening situation was fortunate. These included influential teachers such as George Bell, William ‘Jock’ Frater and artists Sam Atyeo as well as a young Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Albert Tucker. They saw themselves, as the critic Robert Hughes says, being cut off from the wellsprings of western culture by distance and poverty. Fairweather however, was going the other way, trying to escape his European, specifically British, influences. His appearance caused something of a sensation

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187 Ibid.
189 Ibid., 29.
190 Ibid., 14.
191 Ibid., 32.
and in the context of familiar philistinism of Melbourne, Fairweather’s sudden arrival from exotic localities and the quality of his small works, soon to be shown also responded to Fairweather’s practical needs, finding him studios, food and in Lina Bryant’s small shop, galvanised the young artists of the city. \(^{193}\) The artists buying his work. \(^{194}\) One can speculate what the example of Fairweather’s nomadic wanderings had on those who identified as ‘radical artists’ in the atmosphere of fierce debate that Richard Haese identifies as a characteristic of Melbourne, especially in the inter-war period. \(^{195}\) The appearance of Fairweather and the stories of his travels may have been a considerable spur for many of these restless artists.

Murray Bail, in his monograph on Fairweather, relates the incident that caused him to leave Melbourne. Commissioned to do a mural in the Menzies Hotel through the efforts of Jock Frater, \(^{196}\) Fairweather found the task beyond him and promptly abandoned the work after six months of a Melbourne winter. \(^{197}\) Subsequently, Fairweather’s first sojourn in Australia took him across the continent and up the east coast as far as Cairns, to the then mixed fringe settlement of ‘Malay town’. \(^{198}\) In Malay-town, he appears to have had good relationships with the inhabitants who were the cast-offs of a dozen different cultures.

Fairweather frequently had an equivocal relationship with locals, at once dependent on them for physical help to survive, yet ambivalent about how far to mix. He describes his meetings with expatriates in Beijing as uncomfortable and debilitating, but is also critical of the Chinese from whom he rented his room. \(^{199}\) His suspicion of almost everyone at various times can be seen in a letter to H.S. Ede in 1948-49 that Mary Eagle quotes in her essay ‘The Painter and the Raft’ for

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\(^{194}\) Ibid., 30.
\(^{198}\) Ibid., 65-68.
\(^{199}\) Ibid., 38.
the retrospective Fairweather Exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1995. In the letter he suggests that the ruined paintings he sent to Redfern Gallery in London in the period had been tampered with; he writes, ‘… suspect interference from the Jews’.\(^{200}\) This is a disturbing passage, and reminds us of the danger of seeing anyone in too roseate a glow. Fairweather was a man of his times. We should not forget the difference in travel between then and now. Not just the technology of travel has changed, but the framework and speed. The maps are not stained by imperial red, instead you must either deal with what is in front in the ‘other’ territory, or do not go! Fairweather’s psychological state appears to have been deeply affected by his relationship with the locale and population he lived amongst at any time.\(^{201}\) In the periods of his greatest travels however, it still was just possible to move within and be protected by the imperial reach. Fairweather could step back into the fold of the familiar, if not easily, then safely, though the opprobrium of the empire’s servants would have been severe.

Fairweather’s decision to settle finally in the tea-tree swamps of Bribie Island, while appearing eccentric, was entirely in character for such a semi-recluse. This is quite possibly where he felt most at ease, as in Bali in 1932-33\(^ {202}\). Bail implies that Fairweather’s natural home was in motion and on the fringes of, rather than at the centre, of middle-class white Australian society, a natural solitary.\(^ {203}\)

The transforming possibilities of travel and painting are critically entwined in Ian Fairweather, but it is not a path that most mainstream Australians would understand or countenance. In this Fairweather remained a very exotic ‘other’. The essayist Pierre Ryckmans describes him as ‘… an artist of fierce and irreducible originality’\(^ {204}\), regarding his life as an example of the total commitment of one man to paint, no matter what the personal cost. This is the compelling

\(^{203}\) Murray Bail, Ian Fairweather (Australia: Murdoch Books, 2008), 68.
quality that brings me to study both his work and life. This commitment, I would suggest, can be seen as a manifestation of the Daoist concept of the ‘way’ which Fairweather may have been familiar with, from his time in China. Commitment, I have found, is a necessity for the artist as traveller; this is a commitment to being there, in the space of the journey, to realise an intimacy with oneself. In turn it allows the traveller to become aware of and act on the realisations of the road, the ‘way’ that allows the gulf between the external and internal journeys, to be recognised and then bridged. It is working as an artist, which allows this unique crossing to liberation to commence, in a manner unique to artists and that is the discovery of the inner language of ourself.

**Travellers’ guides**

When you enter any bookshop and see the shelves of travellers’ guides, then you are aware of the seduction of travel. This is why Bruce Chatwin, whom I quoted at the beginning of Chapter One, celebrated travel on foot as the proper way to travel, in touch with the road and not overly concerned with arrival. The investment of time and wealth in defining the other and the space the other occupies, is reflected in travel books carried to such other spaces and the travel industry it is a part of. Such publications are the result of surveillance and recording of information over large stretches of time through the process of making the objectified other a stranger-actor on a stage, set within their own familiar space.

The point of my digression along this line is that the space we travel in is already populated. No virgin territory now exists and this was/is true in Australia, the Pacific and all those places regarded as exotic destinations today. Travellers are always in the company of others, both local and on the road. Further, these ‘others’ are not actors on a picturesque stage; they have their own rules of engagement and see the meeting with us as ‘others’ coming into their universe and

operating within their social-cultural and political context. When you travel you are made very aware of your relationship with ‘others’ and to yourself, in the space of the road. It is this condition, the interior and exterior journey’s meeting as Cousineau explains, that is the only territory truly capable of still being explored: ‘Everywhere, the way of the Pilgrim is twofold, exterior and interior, the simultaneous movement of the feet and the soul through time as well as space’. 208 The travelling artist needs to accept this meeting of them and us in equality as a process of their own liberation culturally, spiritually and physically.

Meanwhile my own journeys continue because this is not remembrances of things past, the journey internally is ongoing. Between Papua New Guinea, the NEVER NEVER Project of 1993-95 and now, I have filled journals, painted and travelled. Equally as I write this I am aware that I do not have a home as such, at least not a city or community where I feel capable of staying indefinitely and calling ‘home’. The journey between Alice Springs and Darwin does have a special place in my mind; it is still reverberating. Equally, the 1993 journey is but one of the threads of my own nomadic wanderings, my ‘homelessness’. Such journeys are not undertaken in a void; the time and space of the journey is the traveller’s home for the journey.

Sometimes a feeling of home occurs while one is in transit, between places, or in the wilderness, a no-place which is different from a placeless place. It is a feeling of being emptied, of being dispossessed of all ideas and images, a paradoxical state of motion and stillness. 209

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Fig. 13: Tau Tau Carver. Watercolour by the author, Artist journal.
CHAPTER THREE: Otherness

When you leave home, you are a stranger, and a stranger is always feared. That is why the wise traveller carries gifts. To make a peace offering at every stop of a pilgrimage is to recognize the sacred nature of the journey with a deep personal purpose.210
Phil Cousineau

My personal experience of being a stranger, that is an artist-nomad in a land and culture I was not part of, resonates in this quote from Cousineau. My gift has been the drawings from my journals, a copy of which I often gave to those I met on the way. The cut-out pages, a vacant space within the journal, are not forgotten; somewhere those leaves of paper may continue to exist, delicate reminders for both giver and receiver of a time of exchange and dialogue. Continually working on my paintings and drawings in these journals has given purpose to journeys, which may have otherwise been purposeless. The first journal of the current series was started in Darwin in 1992 and records my first solo journey to Sulawesi via West Timor, in Indonesia.

I intend in this chapter to explore some aspects of travelling in the space of the ‘other’, the impact upon both myself, and possible implications of this experience may have on the artist-traveller. To do this I will refer to the journey I undertook to the Island of Sulawesi in 1992; a 1997 project I helped organise, to bring Singapore-based artists of various backgrounds to the Northern Territory of Australia; and the collaborative project ‘Chance Encounter’ in Singapore, that grew out the North Australian journey. I will argue that ‘otherness’ as a descriptor of ‘others’ is, in reality, a much more fluid concept that should not be used as a rigid delineation by the artist-traveller who wishes to not be a ‘sedentary-traveller’ in Syed Manzurul Islam’s definition.211

211 Syed Manzurul Islam, The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996).
In June 1992 I travelled to Sulawesi in Indonesia. It was not the first journey I had made to those islands. However what was special to me was that it was my first solo trip to Indonesia. My first journal is now the main archive of my experience, on this most beautiful of islands. The evidence of my time on Sulawesi and in the central Highland area of Tana Toraga is in this journal and in my memory.\textsuperscript{212}

The Toragans are famous for their unique architecture and complicated funeral rites. Toragan burials take over a year, and it is an expensive process as the funerals are a public display of the dead person’s wealth and status. The funerals are marked by public sacrifices of expensive animals such as water buffalo and pigs, funereal feasts and distribution of gifts within the community as well as the building of large funeral pyres and pavilions for housing relatives, as well as watching the spectacles of the funeral.\textsuperscript{213} The funerals have also become tourist events. I attended such a funeral, after presenting my own gift to the family of the deceased, as was appropriate.\textsuperscript{214} Tourists made up a considerable proportion of the crowd and saw both the bloody sacrifices as well as the traditional bullfights which took place in an arena of megalithic stones.\textsuperscript{215} In addition the tomb preparation, the traditional cliff burials and death effigies, called ‘Tau Tau’ are a considerable cost to the dead person’s family. As Schmid and Trupp state, ‘The expense of a funeral can often lead to financial ruin for the family that has to host it.’\textsuperscript{216} The final graves for richer Toragans are in cliff face caves and niches. These graves have at their entrances the ‘Tau Tau’, or funeral sculptures that are stylised effigies of the deceased. Lemo Valley, a traditional burial place, is located under a cliff of graves above the paddy fields.

\textsuperscript{212} Mark K Elliot-Ranken, Artists Journal No. 1 1992, possession of the writer.
\textsuperscript{214} Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artist Journal Vol. 1, possession of the artist.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid. I was allowed to be part of the crowd who watched the buffalo fight in the ancient arena, also dodging the less successful buffalos as they ran from bigger opponents during the fights.
\textsuperscript{216} Robert Schmid and Fritz Trupp, \textit{Tribal Asia Ceremonies, Rituals and Dress} (UK: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 289.
I went to Lemo and met one of the carvers, whose own image appears at the beginning of this chapter (Fig. 13). The carver had been working for three decades, on effigies for the rich dead. The Tau Taus looked like the carver and as he had aged so had the effigies, down to the hair and moustaches going grey, as he had used his own hair. The carver had, as I wrote at the time, effectively lined the cliffs with self-portraits.\footnote{Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artist journal Vol. 1, possession of the artist.} I left a drawing with the carver, who in exchange gave me a bone carving of a sword handle I had admired; the carving reminded me of a Picasso face. Such reciprocal exchanges led me to a description of the afterlife from a Toragan landowner that will describe below.

The complicated animist-based belief system of the Toragans, called ‘Aluk-To-Dono’, exists side-by-side with Christianity and Islam. Dutch missionaries introduced Christianity in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, as a counter to the spread of Islam from the lowland areas of Sulawesi.\footnote{Division of Religion and Philosophy, University of Cumbria, UK, PHILTAR, “Toraga Religion,” \url{http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk} (accessed April 24, 2010).} The layout of a traditional house compound is strictly planned and reflects traditional belief systems of the Toragans that are still followed alongside imported religious beliefs. The houses, called ‘Tongkonan’, have segregated men and women’s quarters, as well as a sacred rice store, ‘Alang’ in the Toragan language. I was informed of this and the purpose of the sacred house compound layout while visiting a traditional house compound near the town of Rantapao.\footnote{I was informed of this when visiting a Toragan family in their traditional compound while in Toragaland while in Sulewasi.} The border between the living and the dead is regarded as porous and not to be passed through without trial. This was explained to me by a local Toragan man, who described the passage between this world, ‘Lino’, and the spirit world, as crossing a bridge, ‘Pongko’, while being menaced by dangerous animal spirits. At the other end is the gatekeeper, ‘Puang Malalondongha’, who then guides you to ‘Puya’, the spirit realm of existence. In this space you are half-man and half-god and can intervene in the world to help your family. I recorded this story in my journal. It is one of the most treasured...
items I have from that journey. As I travelled, I drew and painted locals, leaving a drawing with each as I indicated earlier, an exchange and a practice I followed on subsequent journeys.

It is worth noting at this point just how much tourism has played a significant role in the shaping of the current identity of the Toragans. These people of the highlands of Sulewasi in Indonesia have seen sweeping change since the colonialist Dutch administration finally gained control of the area in 1906. Indeed the name ‘Toraga’ comes from the lowland Bugis and Makassarese cultures of Sulawesi, to describe the highlanders with whom they have had a frequently tense relationship. On a particularly interesting website, Patrick van der Meer and his partner Sabine outlined their experience of travelling through Tana Toraga and Sulawesi, seeing the results of religious conflicts that have burned villages, separated formally peaceful communities and decimated the tourist industry. The Van der Meers experienced a riot in Rantepao, the capital of Toragaland, that alludes to the realities the traveller faces while travelling, that is, the forces inside any community are dynamic and alive. The traveller is the witness and is truly ‘other’ in their context. As the Van der Meers’ observe:

Central Sulawesi has been tortured by violence between Christians and Muslims. The area around Lake Poso is certainly worth a visit, but tourism has reduced to near zero here.

The Indonesian policy of ‘Transmigration’, that is the encouragement of internal migration of Indonesians to less populated areas of the archipelago, has, as the Van der Meers observe, exacerbated existing tensions between Indonesian minority

224 ibid., “Funeral Rites in Tana Toraja”, 1-5.
groups on both cultural and religious lines.\textsuperscript{226} This brings into question the pressure on and feasibility of a fixed identity for modern minorities, in multicultural societies in the present time. The Toragans did not recognise themselves as ‘Toragan’ until the name was imposed by the Dutch, who also used internal migration as a political device. This allowed the Dutch to appropriate land for colonial commercial exploitation and break down the resistance of various ethnic and cultural groupings in their colonial territory (the then Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia).\textsuperscript{227}

The identity of the ‘other’ is an evolving concept, especially when those classified as ‘other’ play an active and sophisticated role in exploiting that ‘identity’, as writer and anthropologist Kathleen M. Adams explores in her article ‘Making-up the Toraja? The Appropriation of Tourism, Anthropology, and Museums for Politics in Upland Sulawesi, Indonesia’.\textsuperscript{228} Adams’ argument is that such identities of ‘other’ are not necessarily fixed in the past, but in the dynamics of the present and are as much, in the case of the Toragans, crafted and used by astute and active Toragans, using tourism for their own social, economic and political ends. Toragans have seen enormous and rapid change through contact with the world outside their mountain home. This has seen the culture now known as ‘Toragan’ increasingly stress the importance of funeral rites over other important rituals to cater to tourist market demands. Indeed the society is evolving from an essentially tribal, agriculturally-based, isolated and fractured culture, to a tourist-dependent enterprise that is quite sophisticated in its handling of the challenges it faces on a number of fronts.\textsuperscript{229} I was fortunate to be in Toragaland at a time when the area was comfortably expanding its economic base. Since then major upheavals in Indonesia combined with religious struggles have apparently deeply affected Sulawesi and the Toragans. As much as the tourist seeks to witness the ‘other’ (as

\textsuperscript{226} http://library.thinkquest.org  Indonesian Transmigration Programme; (accessed 25/4/10 2:52 PM)
\textsuperscript{227} ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{229} ibid., 1.
audience to spectacles rather than in a dialogue) so too do the Toragans exploit the essentialising of their identity, as a response to the economic imperatives of tourism.

Kathleen Adams, in her article ‘More than a Ethnic Marker: Toraja Art as Identity Negotiator’, suggests we should look on the art of societies such as Toraja not as passive ethnic markers of fixed and past identities, but dynamic ‘identity negotiators’ used by minority and tribal societies in a political agenda of survival, power and resistance. This change in ‘seeing’ by anthropologists (who are skilfully manipulated by the Toragan power brokers) represents an interesting situation, as the Toragans are doing the influencing rather than the academics doing the classifications.

Adams posits that the recognition of art, as a dynamic negotiating process marks a shift in ethnological viewpoints, saying:

Traditionally, researchers concerned with material culture and identity have tended to approach art as a mirror of intergroup relations rather than recognizing that people actively use art to articulate or reframe such relations. Historically, the dominant trend was to delineate art’s passive function as an ethnic marker or to trace its evolution from a set of sacred icons to ethnic or national symbols.

The point for this exegesis is that when the artist–traveller moves through such a dynamic, not fixed cultural context, then that practitioner is also both a recipient of that which the culture has to offer and a carrier of exterior influences. As Adams says: ‘… the arts provide a particularly apt arena for negotiating, reaffirming, and at times challenging asymmetrical identities.’ The writer goes on to suggest that the arts are a process of resistance for those willing to be makers of history, rather than simply being recipients of mediated ‘narratives’ created by other players.

231 Ibid., 328.
232 Ibid., 328.
Adams notes that the individual, anthropologist or artist-traveller can, unknowingly, be a player in the cultural and political arena through association with contending power groups in the society.\textsuperscript{233} I found this out myself. While in Toraja I met and became friends with a Torajan guide called Ekson. I was to discover that Ekson was quite influential, not only as a well-respected guide but also because he and his family were part of the Torajan ‘Noble’ class.\textsuperscript{234} Torajan society traditionally was divided into ‘Nobles’, ‘Commoners’ and those formally regarded as ‘Slaves’.\textsuperscript{235} Though slavery is now outlawed, the erstwhile ‘slaves’ are still looked down on. Ekson and his family lived to the south of Rantepao, in the gloriously beautiful Sangala Valley. While helping me buy ikats, the local and beautiful weavings of Toraja, Ekson invited me to visit his family and see his home valley. I went and was entranced by both the valley and its inhabitants, and I was offered the opportunity to return and live in the valley in a hut with a studio-veranda attached. It was a stunning offer but unfortunately I could not, in the next year, return. A map exists in my journal drawn by Ekson of the Sangala Valley, showing the village of Pasang, where Ekson’s family traditionally had lived (p. 94).\textsuperscript{236} As well, I have a sketch of the hut and how it would be modified for me to work and live in, and the agreement I made with Ekson concerning the hut (p. 106). Amongst the many sketches, I have one from the veranda of the hut, looking into the forest (p. 95).\textsuperscript{237} It was a paradise, yet not without its challenges.

While travelling with Ekson we went past a family outside a house near his village. When I asked ‘who are they?’, Ekson replied ‘slaves’! The old authorities still held sway and I was, in this context, unwittingly part of the exchange between cultures.\textsuperscript{238} By supporting a resident artist such as myself, Ekson, his family and I

\textsuperscript{233} ibid., 329.
\textsuperscript{234} Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artist Journal, Vol. 1, 1992, possession of the artist.
\textsuperscript{235} Kathleen M. Adams, “Making-up the Toraja? The Appropriation of Tourism, Anthropology and Museums for Politics in upland Sulawesi, Indonesia,” Ethnology, Vol. 34, No. 2, Spring 1995, the University of Pittsburgh, USA, 1995, P; 144 www.jstor.org
\textsuperscript{236} Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artist journal, Vol. 1, 1992, possession of the artist.
\textsuperscript{237} ibid.
\textsuperscript{238} This memory was for me prompted both by Adams’ articles and my own journal entries and images. I had already an inkling of why the offer was made besides one of genuine friendship.
all evidently gained prestige. In the subtle manoeuvring of the Toraja, especially between traditional power sources such as the noble families and newly empowered non-noble groups, this support for me marked a struggle to control both the history of Toraja and the identity presented to the world. Kathleen Adams recognised this in her own work, when interviewed by a noble elder of the Toraja as well as staying with his family. Adams found herself being introduced as ‘their anthropologist’ writing ‘their’, meaning the ‘correct’, history of Toraja. Adams contrasts this with another version of Torajan history delivered by younger, non-noble tourist guides who were quite aware of the variance between the stories and the consequences if their version became the accepted paradigm. Adams ends her article with a warning to other anthropologists, to be aware of the nobles’ sophistication and capacity to manipulate, in bolstering their own authority. As Adams says, ‘In the Toraja case, the tradition of aristocratic authority is infused with the touristic and anthropological politics of the present. Yet, while the invention of tradition is related to the politics of the present, that present is equally infused with the past.’ Similarly Gayatri Spivak has noted that a tendency to essentialise to the clichés of identity can also be a political tool – it enables one to speaks as ‘an African’, ‘a woman’ or even ‘a Toragan’.

A final image of the Sangala Valley is in my journal; it is a watercolour I did from Pasang Village on 2 July 1992. I was looking towards a dominant peak behind the valley called Bebo, (I must have been told the name by Ekson on my visit to his home village.) The sketch has the pattern of small hamlets, tracks, rice paddies and stretches of trees, as the whole of Toraja is well forested. This work conjures up for me the day and the people who were with me: a couple of Australian travellers from Groote Eylandt, and an English traveller who was two years from home. This small scenic painting also acts as a memory prompt in other ways. It

240 Ibid., 145-146.
241 Ibid., 151.
reminds me forcibly, that the ‘other’ is not an abstract object of study, or an easily
categorised set of definitions, but a living breathing person in their own present
space and time, dynamic and in control of their own destiny. ‘Other’ as a concept
dissolves the closer you get to the ‘other’. They have names: Ekson was one. The
boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ not only become blurred, but untenable in
such a situation and it is in these moments that Marcel Proust says you need ‘new
eyes’.  

I found in my time in both Toragaland and later in the seaside town of Pari Pari, a
sense of being enfolded into a way of life I had never known before. It was a
similar feeling that occasionally had come upon me in PNG: a slow shedding of
my own skin and opening of my eyes, a gift of realisation that not everything fits
into a materialist mode of understanding. I would have missed this gift, if I had
remained at home. Syed Manzurul Islam may have said I was experiencing
‘becoming-other’, recognising the possibility of relationships with ‘other’ that
peel away the skins of the exotic from what we think we cannot understand. Through this realisation, I believe I began to de-armour myself of the weapons of
ignorance, but it is still an ongoing process. As Syed Manzurul Islam says:

The other is never a difference in kind, but rather a conceptual
differentiation set in motion by the subject for its own self-realization:
it is the self that others the other for mediation of its own unity.  

Until World War Two it was just possible to travel as Fairweather did, within
the cocoon of the western colonial spaces, without much regard to the Indigenous
others. However, that great conflagration changed the map irrevocably. How then
can nomad-artists travel in a multi-centred world, with a multitude of shifting
identities? This is a world that is marked by conflict on racial, cultural, religious
and economic lines, with hegemonic contenders.

244 “Marcel Proust,” www.quotationspage.com (accessed 14/8/09)
245 Syed Manzurul Islam, The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996).
The artist-traveller needs to shed past internal baggage of who or what the ‘other’ is to negotiate the way between the multiplicities of ‘others’ they will meet. To do so, I contend, artists are required to undertake a journey that is individually transformatory, a ‘nomad strategy’ of finding a way to bridge both the internal and external states of being within us all, as Syed Manzurul Islam\(^{248}\) and Marc Auge\(^{249}\) state. It is an examination of an internal state no less compelling than what is seen, heard and tasted externally along the way.

My personal key, as already noted, is my journal. More than any other process of recording and exploring, the journal can prompt examination of my journeys for it explores my own internal and external processes – how they talk to each other. The Artist journal is a creative document rich in signifiers of the journey. As I look at the journal of my trip to Sulawesi, which also extended through Kupang in west Timor as the entry point to the eastern end of the archipelago, signifiers abound.\(^{250}\) The language of the journal is not just words, but images: the megaliths behind the buffalo fights, the Tau Taus on the cliffs at Lemo, faces and small boats, always a symbol of journeying and voyages. Sprinkled through the journal are images of ideas, some of which I developed into various works of art over the period after I returned to Darwin. It is a negotiation with myself through my own creative language.

My journals also describe my own responses to the challenges of travel, as the experience can be difficult, monotonous, and sometimes dangerous. Frequently, when confronted with a reality as against preconceived notions of what you will meet, travel can be disconcerting and even disappointing. The visualisation, for instance, of the Asia-Pacific region and its inhabitants is very different from its actuality, as I found when living overseas, especially in Papua New Guinea. Such


confronting encounters may reinforce ‘otherness’ instead of challenging them, unless you take Islam’s advice to heart and accomplish the difficult task of shedding the armour of prejudice and preconception. This is important as art, any true art is not, as Picasso said, ‘… so much something to prettify the home as a weapon in a political struggle’. Art is a struggle with an aim, to strip away pretensions and question paradigms deeply embedded in us, for me this is one ‘truth’ that can be relied on.

**Being alone**

Travel for the artist-as-nomad, as much as for any traveller, can be a lonely experience. The long-distance nomad is always a little apart, even in the company of others on the road. As writer and traveller O. R. Dathorne states, when relating his own first trip to China:

> I had a feeling of being totally alone, lost in a sea of faces going about their business in Hong Kong, Taiwan and on the mainland, with little or no concern for those like myself on the periphery.

Travel is not easy; I have felt the aloneness that Dathorne talks about. My journal reveals a very fractured narrative of encounters, which were always challenging. The journal did not offer a seamless story. Its very randomness, what was recorded, drawn, remembered even if incompletely, has to be balanced against what was not recorded. Editing of memory takes place on the journal’s pages.

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253 O.R. Dathorne, *Asian Voyages Two Thousand Years of Constructing the Other* (USA; Bergen and Garvey, 1996), xi.
As an example: in Journal 1 from 1992 in Tana Toraga, I have a short description of my day, staying at Wisma Rantepao. It was 4 July 1992, overlooking the extremely busy town market.  

Side by side are the images of the mosque and the church, backed by the mountains behind the town. On the opposite page is a short description of my day, from early morning and a cold Mandi, (bath) to breakfast, a confrontation with a tame owl (Burung Hantu) and strolling in the busy market. Around me were people and family groups, laughing and hard at work. The painting and entries into the journal

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255 Ibid.
were the only work I was doing.\textsuperscript{256} My journals frequently have entries expressing feelings of being alone and lonely, far from home. Yet this day was not one of them. Though not a part of the local bustle, I was enwrapped in the feeling of the day, the market and, for a short moment, a sense of moving into the everyday excitement of Rantepao at its busiest became my reality. Dathorne’s plaintive expression of being ‘lost in a sea of faces’ will ring true somewhere on the road, but not that day.\textsuperscript{257}

South East Asia, the Pacific, the Americas and Australasia are wonderful, exotic and highly romantic destinations for those who make travel a central part of their lives. A great many artists I have met while working in North Australia and Singapore are constant travellers, not just moving through, but also living far from where they began to travel. This was a major concern for the ‘Crossover Collaborative Group’ of expatriate and local artists that I founded in 1997 while living in Singapore. Through our use of images garnered from our collective travelling, we attempted explore the issues of identity by layering them literally, through mosquito net, the functional material found in many so countries that we all had, at one time or another, had travelled through. The nets created a porous and almost invisible labyrinth in the subdued light of the gallery, moving with the breeze and suddenly illuminated with images multi-layered and swaying as they came through the net. The audience moving through the maze also became both reflectors and shadowy presences in the installation, echoing the movement of shadowy ‘others’ through all our lives. Our images reflected on other participants, the nets, the walls overlapped to fuse into short-lived phenomena of ‘painting’ with light and movement. The whole work interrogated our concepts of ‘identity’, positioning such an idea as a construct of language and experience, mediated in our memories and psyches. These ‘identities’ are much-travelled and grow through the layering of experiences, similar to the layers of paint and wash I apply to my paintings. Some become hidden or scraped back, but none is forgotten and all

\textsuperscript{256} Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artists Journal, Vol. 1, 1992, possession of the artist.

\textsuperscript{257} O. R. Dathorne, \textit{Asian Voyages Two Thousand Years of Constructing the Other} (USA: Bergan & Cavey, 1996), xi.
marks and gestures contribute to the whole such as in my recent painting, *Passage of Light*.

![Image of Passage of Light](image.png)

Fig. 15: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *Passage of Light*. 2007, possession of the artist.

**A chance encounter**

In 1997, with my partner Bernadette Smith, I helped to bring twenty-two artists from Singapore to the Northern Territory. I had lived in Darwin from 1986 to 1994, and in collaboration with the Singaporean Gallery owner Marjorie Chu (Art Forum Gallery, 82 Cainhill Road, Singapore), we took these artists to Kakadu, Katherine Gorge, Darwin and the Kimberley region in West Australia.¹⁵⁸

It was an exploratory journey by the Singaporeans who, as Marjorie once remarked, had a ‘…bodiless country, a city without a hinterland’.¹⁵⁹ Curiously, Marjorie, in undertaking this journey, was building on a tradition of group travels

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¹⁵⁸ Marjorie Chu, Understanding Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: (Singapore: Art Forum Gallery, 2003).
¹⁵⁹ Conversation between myself and Marjorie Chu, Director and Owner of Art Forum Gallery, 82 Cainhill Road, Singapore, 1996.
by Singaporean artists, especially to Bali, where a small Singaporean group referred to as ‘the Pioneers’ had gone in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{260} Our trip subsequently spawned a series of exhibitions and collaborations. One of the projects to grow out of the North Australian journey was the formation of the ‘Crossover Collaborative’. Six artists were involved: Bernadette Smith, myself, Y.Y. Sek, Sunny Tan, Chiang Jing Ying and Valeriu Sepi. Together we developed a project entitled ‘Chance Encounters’. This reflected the way we all came together and the many-layered nature of, and challenges to identity when living outside of one’s normal context. As I said in the concept brief: ‘We look both ways at once, our own story, at other stories and for a period of time an inter-related open-ended narrative space subject to chance and coincidence is created.’\textsuperscript{261} We were exploring not just identities in transit, but also the construction and dynamism of such identities, as well as how those identities negotiate with each other in such a collaborative project as ‘Chance Encounters’. The nature of collaborative projects demands considerable negotiation; each collaborator has their own ideas as to what the project is and how it can be managed.

The project’s main exhibition was actually an ‘Art Event’ held on 26 June 1998 at Art Forum Gallery\textsuperscript{262} in Singapore and was a mixture of installation/performance, sound, projected images and crowd participation as I described earlier in this chapter. We repeated the ‘Chance Encounter’ performance twice in the same venue. Recently the echo of this performance came back into my life; while researching for this exegesis I regained contact with five of the six original participants and new collaborations are planned. The Concept Brief I have quoted from was lost in our 1999 move back to Australia. Chiang Jing Ying, one of the collaborating artists, published the brief on her own blog and while exploring the Net I chanced upon it – synchronicity works, and chance yet again makes no

\textsuperscript{260} Marjorie Chu, the Director of Art Forum Gallery, Singapore, informed me of these earlier artists’ trips to Bali. Mrs Chu had originally organised some of the Bali sojourns.


The article attempted to outline our reasons for collaborating and the space we created in the gallery, to explore issues of identity and travel in a very different locale. Inevitably, though we were less aware of it during the Crossover Collaborative group’s existence, we were touching on the nature of ‘otherness’. For expatriates such as myself, Bernadette and Valeriu Sepi, whose home is in Rumania, this could not but affect us in Singapore. What I came to find however, was the way ‘otherness’ could also affect the other collaborators especially Chiang Jing Ying, who was of Chinese descent and from Sabah in Malaysia.

Jing had ‘permanent residence’ status in Singapore; this meant Jing was watched and controlled by the Singaporean authorities for any untoward behaviour, especially expressing alternative political or social views through her practice as an artist/educator. Jing was always in a precarious position, especially as much of her practice was based around the abuse of women in South-East Asia.

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263 As recently as May 14, 2010 we managed to re-establish to contact the other artists from this group and revive the Crossover Collaborative.
Jing, who subsequently won the Jurors’ Choice in the Singapore Art Award, 1998, used images of rape and torture supposedly from East Timor that were posted on the Internet without citation, to draw attention to the state of brutal oppression, as the new nation of ‘Timor-Leste’ emerged from its long struggle for independence. The mixed-media work was titled ‘Victim in May’ (fig. 16) and Jing was pressured to modify the title to ‘Victim’ after the Indonesian Ambassador to ASEAN tried to have the work banned from exhibition in Hanoi, when the work was shown in the capital of Vietnam. Eventually, after many threats including deportation, she was forced to make the concession of changing the name. Jing is now an instructor at the National University of Singapore in Communication and New Media, after exhibiting in Germany and Singapore, and chance plus the Internet has let us reconnect in the last few days.

Artists do have a part to play in creating and using the creative spaces that can be found between the meeting points of ‘them and us’ but only by subverting the

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264 Profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/cnmcjy/ Chiang Jing Ying, Instructor Communication and New Media, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 2009, (accessed 3/5/10 11:05 PM)
266 Chiang Jing Ying has confirmed these details by e-mail on May 18, 2010, 6:02 PM.
boundaries frequently erected by elites from various states/societies, by presenting alternative moments for dialogue. Alison Broinowski gives a useful overview of this constant state of exchange and the length of time this has gone on.\textsuperscript{267} Australian artists in this sense have long recognised the true position of our community in relation to our region. Broinowski’s central thesis, that artists are interlocutors, capable of crossing multiple divides, and that it is the artist’s ability to work with language beyond the normal paths, that can provide bridges, is highly relevant to my own position on this area of possibility.\textsuperscript{268}

**The Big Sky Horizon**

Filmmaker Bernadette Smith, in her documentary of our project 'Big Sky Horizon' that brought twenty-one Singaporean artists to the Northern Territory of Australia, uses the language of the participants and the wonderful scenery of Kakadu to attempt to explore the reaction of these artists, to the space and strangeness many felt in north Australia.\textsuperscript{269} In this documentary, now accessible via [http://vimeo.com/11701383](http://vimeo.com/11701383), a series of interviews was conducted with participants while in Kakadu National Park. Many of the artists found themselves uncomfortable in the vastness of Kakadu and the apparent emptiness of the Northern Territory. For me, after the crowds and the different concept of personal space in Singapore, it was a relief to return to a place where I had spent a decade. The Singaporeans were unaware that the British established Darwin as a rival to Singapore. By serendipitous coincidence, an exhibition, ‘Beyond Chinatown’, was then under way at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, in conjunction with the National Library of Australia, on the long connections between the two tropical cities.\textsuperscript{270}

Paradoxically, as the Singaporeans were travelling to Darwin, many of the

\textsuperscript{268} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{269} Bernadette Smith, *Big Sky Horizon*, possession of Ms B. Smith.
descendants of the Chinese immigrants who came to Darwin over the last one hundred years were travelling to China. Northern Territory writer Diana Giese, in her publication Beyond Chinatown, in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, wrote about several families from Darwin who had re-established ties with their families in China. Those early immigrants, many of whom came via Singapore, would have known the same discomfort, with the vast and seemingly empty spaces of north Australia. Giese outlines the persistence that the Chinese settlers showed to maintain contact with their homeland as well as their feelings of loneliness and frequent terror at the emptiness they faced in Australia. As Eric Rolls reports, the Chinese became targets of virulent bigotry and government harassment from 1888, when the discovery of ‘rubies’ (later found to be garnets) in the Macdonnell Ranges west of Alice Springs, then a one-person telegraph station, saw the first systematic, government-led attempt to restrict Chinese immigration by South Australia, then the owner of the Northern Territory. Eventually this culminated in the notorious ‘White Australia’ Policy. As Rolls says of the year 1888 and the subsequent decades, ‘the effect on Australia was dramatic: 1888 is the most dubious year in our development. It finally lifted us clean out of Asia where geography placed us and laid us down again in the same position as an awkward slab of Europe.’ The relationship of Australia and Asia is beyond the scope of this exegesis, but its influence on each of us is still remembered and is often odious to our relationship to our region. In the Northern Territory as recently as 1993 I saw, daubed on the walls of the Northern Land Council headquarters on the Stuart Highway in Darwin, the obnoxious ‘KKK’ symbols of racial xenophobia that still can appear in this country. Fortunately on the journey I helped organise for the Singaporeans we did not, to my knowledge, run into any such confronting moments but it is still there, under the surface, and can cloud attempts to explore new and alternative ways of seeing our two-way relationship with Asia.

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271 Ibid.
273 Ibid., 456.
The artists, all articulate and worldly travellers, constantly referred to the ‘clean air’ quality of the north, explaining on video that for all of them it was the overwhelming attraction on this trip. It was difficult to internalise a place of such immense distances, after the closeness and jostling interdependency of Singapore. The clean air was more than just air quality; it was the realisation of a personal space, outside a tightly regulated and physically crowded island. Bernadette Smith’s documentary attempted to explore the concept of ‘clean air’ from the Singaporean point of view.274

What then do we expect to find in each other when we leave our homes? It is difficult to entirely separate our assumptions from our discoveries, however you do become aware just how easily those monolith conceptualisations of the ‘other’ dissolve on closer contact. Our collective efforts within the Crossover group were an attempt to address at least some of these issues, and explore the language of alternative dialogues through our personal journeys.

The ‘other’ is our constant travelling companion. Questions of who we are, where do we come from, what is our language and how do we view their world, abound. These are only a few of the conundrums of meeting the ‘other’ on their ground, because then we and not they are the ‘other’. To travel to another place is to step into the other’s place, their home, culture and society. The relationship between the traveller and those they meet is not one of alien meeting alien but instead like meeting like, more than we may be prepared to admit. The processes of categorising strangers as ‘others’ may initially be inevitable, however for a deeper relationship, to be folded within the place you travel too, something else is needed, a dissolving of the barriers that appear to divide ‘us and them’. The ‘other’ has a point of view, and frequently, strongly-held belief systems that may challenge our own; we need to listen. In the next chapter I will explore artists’ journeys: my own, Ian Fairweather’s as well as more recent artists’ journeys into Africa, Central America and China.

Fig. 18: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *Prahу*. 1992, watercolour. Artist journal Vol. 1, possession of the artist.
CHAPTER FOUR: Tourist v Artist-Nomad

Artists seek new ways of codifying. In language one speaker must learn the language of the other. In art perhaps something different is possible—the invention of a crossover language that works for particular encounters, while needing no grammar outside itself.\textsuperscript{275} Nicholas Jose

As I have stated, Syed Manzurul Islam categorises travellers into two broad groups: the ‘nomad-traveller’ and the ‘sedentary traveller’. As one travels, if one strives to be the former and not the latter then personal change, a lowering of defences designed to keep ‘others’ away, needs to be realised. This is part of the ‘nomad-strategy’: to allow oneself to be there in that moment of interchange with the individuals you meet. I believe that to avoid falling into the trap of the ‘sedentary traveller’, the artist-nomad must discover the language they need to investigate who they are within the space of where they are and at the moment of ‘being there’. It is risky and, as I found in Africa, the ‘nomad-strategy’ did not always work, perhaps by striving too much, blinding oneself to other possibilities and realities. One is after all not a missionary of a new consciousness; Africa already knows more than I could ever know about struggles for liberation. In Africa you are the supplicant and that is an important lesson to learn. Rather, it was not until writing this chapter that the realisation finally came to me: I never really heard myself on my Africa journey. I therefore could not comprehend, until distance and this project became imperative, that I had also not listened to the voices of the journey.

Africa and China are good starting and finishing points for this chapter; it is my journeys to these destinations I will explore together with James Clifford’s account of his journey to Palenque, the Mayan archaeological site in Mexico. I will look at China through the eyes of my own travels, Ian Fairweather’s sojourn in China and

\textsuperscript{275} Nicholas Jose, \textit{Chinese Whispers} Australia: Wakefield Press, 1995), 140.
the recent ‘China Exhibition’ by Joe Furlonger and Jun Chen. These journeys and the extended stay by Furlonger and Chen in China took place in 1928-36, 1993, 1998 and 2007 respectively.\textsuperscript{276}

Africa

My journey to Africa was in 1993 and I flew into Africa from Malaysia. The journal has quite a lot to say about of Penang, the Cameron Highlands and Kuala Lumpur, as I managed to miss the flight to Johannesburg. My displeasure at this turn of events is evident in the entries; curiously the journal has a lot of drawings of faces and figures, but not so much of landscapes or buildings.\textsuperscript{277} After a flight of nine hours Africa appeared over the horizon grey and tawny, dry as Australia and on landing I found it looked like Australia. Picked up by the backpacker accommodation I called, I was driven through a city which could have been western Sydney until one looked closely. The suburbs of outer Johannesburg are a collection of compounds with high razor wire fences, big dogs, cameras and lights.

The backpackers, ‘Travellers and Backpackers Retreat’ Bez Valley, was a lovely old house and the guests were the usual colourful mixture found in any such place.\textsuperscript{278} Air travel does not prepare you for anything except airports; only on the ground, as Bruce Chatwin would argue, could you really smell the dust and feel the textures of a place.\textsuperscript{279}

The tension was palpable in the air of the city, it was dangerous. I was advised not to go down town but I had travelled too far not to. It was the time between Nelson Mandela’s release and the general elections which made him President of South Africa. There were guns on hips in the street and a palpable edginess everywhere. I did drawings of this but curiously did not get out the paints; Johannesburg was to

\textsuperscript{276}Joe Furlonger, Jun Chen, China exhibition, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, June 3 to July 3, 2008.
\textsuperscript{277}Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artist journals, possession of the artist.
\textsuperscript{278}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{279}Bruce Chatwin argues this point in all his books especially \textit{Songlines}. 
me a black, white and grey dusty city that did not invite close scrutiny. I was out of my depth and knew it, however the Soweto Gallery, hidden upstairs in the business district, greeted me with perhaps more enthusiasm than I deserved. The work in the gallery reflected the violent and oppressive realities of existence in Johannesburg; thugs tried to stop them showing their work and had attacked artists who did so.280

I found the same situation though not the same sense of menace in Cape Town, that beautiful city on Africa’s tip. In Green Market Square the art stalls had lino prints on cheap paper exploring the resistance, graphic and powerful. The artists told me of the struggle to keep going when their studios were regularly burnt down. Again and again in the street, my gaze met the tense return of people living in a highly charged atmosphere. It was better to say little, learning to question my fast-crumbling preconceptions of Africa. A sense of introspection comes over me whenever I think of Africa. Certainly I had to face a painful realisation that no ‘nomad-strategy’ except quiet observation would appear to work in such a place. In this context, despite contact with a number of artists, I was back to being more of a tourist.

Fig. 19: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Sketch of a Cleaner in Cape Town. 1993, ink and

280 Mark Elliot-Ranken, Artists journals, possession of the artist.
Later I travelled to Malawi, staying in Lilongwe and Cape Macleay on Lake Malawi, which was full of Australians. I travelled with so many preconceptions that were not sustainable; Africa was full of people, engaged in frequently dynamic political, social and cultural struggles. Africa was challenging, existing I felt on its own terms and with its own agenda that pays little heed to the likes of me. It was a humbling journey, however the true lesson of Africa did not become apparent until my Australian return: it was about Africans, collectively and individually. The Africans I met were never a silent ‘other’ but dynamic, thoughtful and exciting people – yes, deeply challenged by their situation of frequent poverty and violence, but not supine or unable to chart their own course. Gradually I did meet more individuals, almost all helpful, and they did not fit any stereotype that made sense to me. Africa is above all people, not just a place.  

Rereading the journal of my African trip brings back to me one important realisation I made on the way. The experience of being there, in Africa, made the conceptualisation of ‘landscape’ highly problematic. As I wrote in a final journal entry while in Johannesburg, ‘In this climate landscape has become a looking glass reflecting not the ‘land’ but the viewer.’ Landscape is after all an attempt to reconcile what one is seeing with what is actually there, and the image attempts to bridge the discrepancies. Yet illustrating ‘landscape’ is not an innocent pastime; being in a position to paint the land means some authority to do so, therefore implying legitimacy for your claims of what is there. It is especially important for colonial projects, as it implies the authority of an imperial power. Both Africa and Australia have been subject to these attempts to claim a land by removing from the view as quickly as possible; ‘others’ who may have a counter and more secure claim, Indigenous Australians and Africans both have suffered the affects of this colonising process. To undertake landscape, be it topographical

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281 Ibid.
282 Ibid.
283 Ibid. These thoughts came to me on my last day in Africa, March 7, 1993, while staying at a local Youth Hostel in Johannesburg.
drawings as Captain Cook and other explorers did on their voyages of discovery, or the paintings of Arthur Streeton, such as *The Land of the Golden Fleece* 1926, showing a scene of wealth produced from a land now made productive by the labour of pioneering men, (and it usually is men who are valorised) is to claim ownership and a right to the land, by the work of your cultural pioneers. Yet self-evidently, I was in a continent that was heavily populated and had a history different from any I had experienced.

Like my own country, Africa was populated with ancient cultures long before the west could boast the same and the cultural, spiritual complexity of this is beyond the scope of this exegesis, however in the context of my own African journey I felt increasingly uneasy concerning ‘landscape’ as a valid methodology to examine this viewers understanding of Africa. There was no innocence it seemed to me in the lands of Africa; the country everywhere had a knowing quality of many feet journeying across its hide. The journal indicates that I was questioning just how and what I had perceived as landscape. My own relationship to the landscape, which before had played a large part in my work, needed to be rethought. However this may just the ‘nomad-strategy’ I needed. Unconsciously I had the opportunity to turn the gaze of myself back on myself. To challenge this aspect of my own self as an act of liberation, that may be point of the whole journey a necessity rather than an indulgence and the result of ‘being there’. An unexpected but not unpredictable moment which sums up my journey: Africa was difficult but never dull.

Finally I returned to Darwin, I had not come to grips with this journey; the journal usually so helpful was confused, as I was. Even today, fourteen years later, the entries and drawings of Africa are difficult to ponder. It was not a comfortable

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285 Christopher Allen, *Art in Australia From Colonization to Postmodernism* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 96-97, fig. 76.
286 Ibid.
287 Ibid. This was an especially trying episode as one of the travellers I was with had malaria and needed hospitalisation.
journey but invaluable none the less. What paintings I did I was not happy with, and most have now disappeared. Which terrain had I really travelled through theirs, or my own internal state of confusion? Who had examined whom? I have no answer to these questions. My feelings in Africa ranged from excited to confused, and Alain de Botton in *The Art of Travel* would suggest that this is inevitable in almost any journey. For these challenges to my own limited horizons I am still glad I went to Africa.\(^{288}\)

**Palenque Log**

Whose terrain we are travelling through and how we see each other is the subject of ethnologist James Clifford’s *Palenque Log*. Clifford describes travellers who travel outside the normal tourist package tours as ‘Independent Travellers’. These travellers could include individuals who may be artist-nomads. This is an image we all might hope to project: worldly, independent yet full of sympathetic wonder and concern for appropriate non-exploitative contact between them and us.\(^{289}\) However Clifford makes a point which would seem obvious yet may escape us. The gaze, being two-way, is not a mirror which always reflects favourably back on us, we are assessed by criteria that we may be only barely aware. Clifford visits Palenque, the great Late Classical Mayan city. Here the tomb of Pacal the ruler of the city was found by Mexican archaeologists. The writer talks less of the ruins than of the effects of tourism, the thrills of discovery and its reality.

Change has come to Palenque and it is a major tourist attraction that also draws its quota of ‘Independent Travellers’, as well as mainstream tourists. The tourist industry in Palenque however, admits and supports some of the local peoples and excludes others. In particular Clifford examines the rival relationships, between the local Chamulan, Lacandon and Chol tribal groups and the tourists. The tribal


\(^{289}\) Clifford James, *Routes Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1997), chapter 8 *Palenque Log*, 220-237.
peoples are struggling to survive; they are all dependent on the tourist trade as a mainstay. They jockey for the right to have the most favourable spots to display souvenirs, against a backdrop of receding economic horizons and dispossession.

Clifford relates the story of John L Stephens, an early independent traveller who reached Palenque after a rugged overland journey. When Stephens finally arrived in 1840 he found that the locals had been trading with sea captains from New York, his hometown for some time, and knew more of his city than he did of theirs. Clifford makes the point that current independent travellers like to identify with the romantic image earlier travellers such as Stephens projected, yet it is already a known and well-traversed route and not just by independent travellers. Yet travellers can still be fooled by the romantic image of themselves, as the first arrival in a strange land they will interpret for following travellers. It is easy to forget that the local inhabitants will interpret your presence through their own agenda. Clifford includes himself in the meta-narrative of the independent traveller, clearly examining his own responses to the situations he finds himself in.

This is a feeling I noted in Africa. It was not until I saw that journey through this realisation that many of the things that troubled me about my African journey fell into place. It is the baggage of travelling; I expected the romance of Africa in a continent the Malawians and South Africans called home. I also expected and saw victims of poverty disease and violent political regimes I could never know in Australia, yet I met people and societies coping, changing and growing. It was my eyes that were blind to their reality, not the other way round. Yes, I did come from a privileged context and, yes, many Africans would not know such privilege but equally, many had a sophisticated and subtle world-view made from very different experiences than mine.

**China**

I went to Yunnan Province in South West China during 1998, with a party of

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290 Ibid., 227-228.
Chinese and European artists who lived at that time in Singapore. Marjorie Chu, Director of Art Forum Gallery, organised the journey. Yunnan is mountainous and has a history of independence from China. It was an independent kingdom (Nan-Chao) until the Mongol invasions of 1253. Yunnan is also a plateau connected to Tibet, Thailand and South-East Asia; the province also has a large number of minorities such as the Naxi, Tibetans, Li and Sani peoples.\(^{291}\) As John Fairbank and Edwin Reischauer explain in their overview of China’s history, the country is more an amalgam than a single monolithic entity.\(^{292}\)

Fig. 20: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Moon-Gate, Confucian School, Baisha, 1998, 70mm x 110mm, ink on paper, Artist journal.

Lijiang, the city where we spent the greater part of the journey, is a gem. The city combines both a modern grey city and an ancient warren of alleys, temples and markets.

Around the city are the backdrop of the Jade Dragon (Yulongxueshan), Mountains, Tiger Leaping Gorge (Hutiaoxia) and the first bend of the Yangzi River.
With paddy fields, temples, lakes and a myriad of small provincial centres such as the mud-brick Baisha and its four-hundred-year-old Confucian school, who would not be overwhelmed by these experiences? My journal of this journey has a drawing of the school’s crumbling moon-gate shown above.

Fortunately, travelling with twenty other Chinese artists to the home province of Admiral Zheng Hi, the three-jewelled eunuch, in the footsteps of Marco Polo cannot help but smooth the passage. Sunny Tan, our friend and artist, made it clear just how at home she felt but it was understandably a sensation denied to me. My experience was the opposite, yet it was a feeling that faded with familiarity; after a week I felt as if I could stay forever.

Someone did though much earlier than I. In *Chinese Whispers* the writer Nicholas Jose relates the story of an Australian missionary from Queensland, John Williams, who came to Yunnan in 1904 and stayed to his death in 1944. Williams worked with the Yi people near Lijiang. In 1935 Williams managed to negotiate with the later President of China, commissar Yang Shangkun, to deliver safe passage to the

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293 *A Tour to the Mysterious Land of Yunnan* (Yunnan Provincial Travel and Tourism Administration, 1998).
294 This was one of the many conversations we had on this trip comparing our different expectations and experiences; Sunny has recently re-contacted us from Hawaii where she now lives.
Red Army across this area of Yunnan. This was the Second Red Army according to Sun Shuyun, whose book *The Long March* records the ordeals of those who undertook this epic.

Long March soldiers took such missionaries hostage and they frequently died, but Williams must have been a persuasive character. The Second Red Army crossed the Yangzi at its first bend, where other great conquerors had also passed. Even now, the memory still moves me when I remember standing on the suspension bridge over so much history. And added to this is my own little part of the narrative in our journey to Yunnan; I would not have known of Williams had I not read Nicholas’ account, however it is now part of the complex weaving of my personal narrative as well as affecting the memories of our journey to the province. Again the ‘being there’ dynamically affects my own understanding not only of Yunnan but the influence it still has on me, for this was a ‘Chance Encounter’ as I heard stories of Williams in Baisha from the local apothecary who was keen to relate this very local history. In any ‘nomad-strategy’ giving and receiving are both integral to the process. My journal contains small drawings of the paddy fields and some of the simple machinery the Chinese farmers have invented to work their fields. Other drawings are the usual images of streets, places and people working, children and dogs playing, but one thing for me stands out especially in the larger works of ink on paper I did on site. My first observations in my journal are often panoramic when I first arrive. Latter works concentrate on the minutiae of daily life. From paddy field to paddy worker, bent double and working harder than I would ever like to imagine myself working, this is what I remember most. These tough, laughing farmers working all day would stop and come to study what we recorded in our notebooks and frequently beamed with pleasure as their own images looked back at them.

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We were only in China a fortnight, yet the experience remains amongst the most powerful of my travels. No wonder Alan Thorne calls China the ‘powerhouse of Asia’ and artists such as Ian Fairweather, Joe Furlonger and Jun Chen, for different reasons, were also drawn into its orbit.

**Seeing China, three artists**

Fairweather first came to Shanghai in 1929 and stayed to 1934 then returned in 1935 until 1936 and in that time, so far as is known, moved between and lived in Beijing and Fooochow as well as visiting many places in between. His stay was marked by extreme poverty, danger, loneliness and an ongoing commitment to learning Chinese language and painting. His work of the time is transitory, relying on recording what he saw, felt and experienced. It was never simply a tourist view and not yet near his later power, but nevertheless essential to Fairweather’s development. Curiously on his second sojourn in 1935, Fairweather must have been there as John William was negotiating for his life in Yunnan, but Fairweather could not have known of it.

In all, Fairweather was in China for seven years. Those years were possibly the

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297 Alan Thorne and Robert Raymond: *Man on the Rim the Peopling of the Pacific*, Angus and Robertson, Australia, 1989 P; 169 -187
most important, to all that was to come in Fairweather’s life and development as an artist. No one remains untouched by contact, with such a massive cultural magnet as China. Fairweather’s surviving works from the China years are impressive, figurative and influenced by his contact with Chinese calligraphy and paintings. Works such as West Lake Hangchow 1933 are panoramic and exhibit both an awareness of the culture and country, through the flowing brushwork and subdued colour. In such works, Fairweather is searching for a visual language capable of expressing the impact of the China. For me his most interesting work of the period is the exquisite Bridge in Peking 1935, an oil on cardboard painting featured below. Fairweather plays tricks with us in this work; it is a vision of a China Fairweather both lived in and invented. It is doubtful that the bridge could now be found – perhaps it is an amalgam of all small bridges in old Peking (Beijing) that he saw. Who is the figure hidden in the curve of the bridge whose outline is delicately hinted at: a lover, a ghost? The work has a bitter-sweetness for a time lost, a personal nostalgia for past experiences.


299 Ibid., 36.
300 Ibid., 44.
The experience of China in the turmoil of the 1930s stayed with Fairweather for the rest of his life. His gaze was turned onto an interior terrain populated by his own memories of vanished and idealised worlds. The old, traditional China he knew only existed in part, already a torn fabric as the new China emerged yet, as I found in my own short travels in China, not entirely gone. The entries in my journal explore that experience, of moving in a landscape that was at once so old but far from static. In the short period I was in China, drawings and paintings of the spectacular mountains dominate yet gradually, as stated earlier, more intimate elements appear: paddy workers, an old brick kiln, rooftops and temple details. Drawing something in a new place is the most effective way I know to start learning about where you are. As a ‘strategy’ for the nomad-artist, the act of drawing frequently sets up a meeting place for unexpected encounters with whoever stops to look over your shoulder. These details are tied to talking with and hearing the stories of individuals, such as the old priest at the Yufengsi Temple under the Jade Dragon Mountains in Yunnan. During the Cultural Revolution, I was told by my fellow travellers who could talk to the local inhabitants, the old man threw himself in front of the five-hundred-year-old camellia trees, regarded as sacred on the temple’s front terrace, to save them from destruction by Red Guards.301 This is a 'history' that is not reported but quietly and carefully remembered in the local community, to remind them of what can happen even in these dramatically picturesque mountains. The temple is not just a scenic or sacred space, but also a site of cultural and political protestation and resistance. Unsurprisingly, no mention of this incident is made in the Yunnan Provincial Travel and Tourism’s publication I have quoted from previously, though a picture of the camellia bush features prominently in the book.302 It is not just Yunnan that is a mysterious land. Fairweather, like so many other travellers, let himself into this flow and travelled to strange places not just by foot, boat and rickshaw.

Joe Furlonger and Jun Chen travelled for six months in China together, after the

301 M. K. Elliot-Ranken, Artists journals, possession of the artist.
302 A Tour to the Mysterious Land of Yunnan (Yunnan Travel and Tourism Administration, China, 1998).
‘Three Australian Painters’ Exhibition at the Guan Shanyue Art Museum, Shenzen in 2007. As the writer Evan Hughes points out, travel is an integral part of Furlonger’s practise as an artist. His travels have been both in Europe and the Asian Pacific regions. It would be easy to instantly see similarities between Fairweather’s works from the China period and Furlonger, and an influence is certainly there. Both artists reference Chinese calligraphy in their use of line. As well, an awareness of the peculiar opaque, grey, floating world quality of the Chinese landscape is evident, but one should be careful. As Evans says:

Painting China is an ancient and mysterious prospect. Mastered by few and far between over the centuries, it is one of the most confounding landscapes to view. The by-product of modern life has made viewing its hills, valleys, rivers, and cities almost a test.  

Fairweather took almost fifty years to work through his feelings and impressions of China. Furlonger has started this particular journey in an immensely different era under very different conditions. No brutal civil war to contend with, no warlords and Japanese invaders or famine and pestilence stalking the land and populace. Fairweather did see at least some of these events such as the bombing of Shanghai by the Japanese, but later artist-nomads can only imagine such a time.

Jun Chen, Chinese-born and trained, arrived in Brisbane from China in 1994. His paintings are thick with oil paint and Chun models his materials, with slashes of the palette knife and slabs of paint. Furlonger in this work uses a more provisional approach, sketchy using washes and a sense of ambiguous space, the same approach I would and did use in my journal entries of Yunnan. Looking at the work of these two artists, I am aware of how different their points of view are and how it is reflected in their very approach to the subject matter of China – or is that the subject matter at all; rather I suspect it is the act of travelling through China from very different departure points. Painting is such an ambiguous action

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303 Ibid., 3.
304 Joe Furlonger, Jun Chen, China Joe Furlonger and Jun Chen (Australia: Ray Hughes Gallery, 2008), 29.
that flirts with our presumptions to know what is happening before our eyes, and then disabuses us of this position. In Jun Chen’s work the view is close-up; most of the work is either street scenes such as *Red Wall* (40), cityscapes, *Old City Beijing II* (36) or natural features such as *Water City II* (39). There is a familiarity with the intricacies of an old and complex entity in his work.

Furlonger must rely on the fleeting impression afforded by continual motion; he captures the transience of travel in his use of wash, line and quickly executed gesture. The paintings of the two artists are different, not just because of differing technique but different experiences. Furlonger, as Fairweather did, had to travel as a stranger in a strange context, using his art to build some form of momentary crossing between his perspective and China. Furlonger had only a few months, Fairweather a few years. However Fairweather may have had a double advantage: not just the longer sojourn, but also his proficiency in Chinese. With language Fairweather could glimpse and travel within another world.

I am not aware if Furlonger can speak any Chinese; it is difficult to learn and works on principals entirely different to western phonetic languages. I know from my own experience in Singapore just how opaque Chinese can be, especially as there are so many dialects and local variants such as Hokkien, Cantonese as well as Mandarin. Fairweather was competent enough to later translate and illustrate the popular Chinese tale *The Drunken Buddha* in 1965 while living in Queensland. His work became increasingly distanced from the original memories the longer Fairweather worked them over in his paintings. The act of painting became the context independent of place, using a visual language entirely Fairweather’s own. In contrast, the viewpoint that Furlonger employs is panoramic, rather than close-up as in Jun’s work. Furlonger’s paintings *Guangzhou* (p. 20) or the cityscape *Chinese City* (p. 15) shows us the outsider’s viewpoint. The nomad-artist keeps at a distance until he, Furlonger, can modify his own visual language to this new

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306 Joe Furlonger, Jun Chen, *China Joe Furlonger and Jun Chen* (Australia; Ray Hughes Gallery, 2008).
context. In the exquisite works *Great Wall near Beijing* (p. 19) and the austere *Great Wall near the Ming Tombs* (below), Furlonger has found a way to connect, through the complex process of painting China.  

Two artists, two journeys, even if they are travelling together as Jun and Furlonger did. A comparison of two works by the two artists emphasises this state of parallel journeys: *Shanghai Suburbs* (p. 23) by Furlonger and *Beijing View* (p. 34) by Jun. Each work was created on this joint journey yet they could not be more different and not just because of technique or media. Both share a panoramic view of a cityscape; yet Furlonger sees Shanghai through a seemingly impenetrable pearl grey haze, the red roofs unsubstantial and floating in the distance.  

For Jun no such vacillation exists; the Beijing of his painting is as substantial as the red tile roofs of this great metropolis. He cuts through decisively to the bones of the city leaving the sky dust filled as the air which blows in from the Gobi Desert, just beyond the Great Wall.

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307 Ibid.
308 Ibid.
Jun’s Beijing is a city dissected by small streets in a grid and walled in hidden courtyards, where private family life can go on. Beijing has always been a strategic point for the Chinese. It is a mere sixty-four kilometres from the Great Wall’s main entrance, and a natural base for controlling central Asia and protecting the North China plain. The Chinese rulers have always been uneasy about what comes from beyond the wall.  

Jun’s painting emphasises the public/private quality of Chinese life reflected in its architecture, the house built around the courtyard, both private and defensible. The family unit is traditionally all-important and the foreigner, the nomad, an unsettling presence. The travellers have the luxury of movement but not invisibility, as they move through the loops of the land and the relationships of the road. Travel can also create intersects to new places and unsettling possibilities; this is the gift of travel to the nomad-artist, the tantalising glimpse of infinite possibilities on horizons.

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I have included at this point in the chapter a photograph taken in Baisha of a walled courtyard and gateway. The small, dun-coloured town of Baisha is a very old provincial capital for the Naxi people, one of the minorities of Yunnan province.

We walked through the city, along its very dusty streets, tasting the dust and being studied by the local inhabitants. This courtyard house was typical of the architecture, an accretion of building, rebuilding through troubled and good times. Mud-brick walls, the straw still sticking out of the latest sun-dried repairs, against rough and dressed stone lower foundations. They presented a fascinating patina of blank, secretive surfaces that suddenly open into courtyards used for agriculture and the daily life of families. The small gates are easily barred, as the town had known the terror of the red guards and other invaders. Nothing was symmetrical, everything looked repaired and dusty but very enduring. In winter, we were told, the snow would be two metres deep against these walls and the temperature well below freezing. While we were in Yunnan it was always cold, even during the middle of the day.
Paintings can be like gates I find, allowing access to the inner terrain for the artist-nomad willing to walk the way. Artist-nomads, such as the ones I have mentioned in this chapter, offer us a way in, a gate, to their inner individual terrain; they all move in different ways through the land and cultures they encounter. The works created through liberated travel become a gate and this is the most generous of gifts. It is a gift of liberation and is made liberating by the strength of the artist-nomad’s personal path, to a language of liberation. But the gift of the gate can only be open, when the other is met steadily and in equality. No one is then denied the gate as an opening to liberation, a state of existence as the writer Rob Pope suggests, that provides the space for creativity to manifest itself in the transformative opportunity of become-other.  

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CHAPTER FIVE: Rafts

A final point must be made, and this is that we have an unfortunate tendency to see the world through a single eye. Very often we seem precluded from being able to enter into any experience within its own terms, having left our own presumptions and presuppositions at home in the West.311

O.R. Dathorne

O.R. Dathorne describes the difficulty for any traveller in negotiating the experience of travel, especially without a personal language capable of bridging the space between the exterior and interior journeys. This is a road the individual takes when searching for individual answers. This is the challenge within the space of the journey, to drop the blinkered conquistador’s gaze by tapping into the language of one’s individual interior journey and seeing, as Proust said, ‘with new eyes’.312

There has to be an acceptance, indeed embrace, of a multi-focal understanding that acknowledges the existence and validity of the other.

The artist Sean Scully, in his travels through Central and South America, has provided us an intriguing codex of his progress through photos of some spectacular doorways313. In recording these images, Scully builds a reference system upon which his aesthetic responses are based. Yet if the unique space of the journey is to be fully realised, then artists such as Scully are obliged to be aware of the multi-layered experience of travel. It is not just pictures and raw material gathered that makes the journey explicable. It is the exploration of one’s own memory, that inner terrain we carry with us. My own work such as The Traveller’s Room or Jerusalem Track, are examples of one can be inspired by these chance encounters.

Fear of the ‘other’ has grown steadily in our country and recent events, such as that

311 O.R. Dathorne, Asian Voyages Two Thousand Years of Constructing the Other (USA: Bergin and Garvey, 1996), 219.
313 David Carrier, Sean Scully (UK: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2004).
in 2009, off the island of Palau Bintam in Indonesia, where an Australian ship was anchored with Sri Lankan refugees refusing to disembark, highlights this. The travel advice of the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (15 September 2008) for Indonesia, restates the warning, ‘do not leave home’. These spaces are not empty, they are not innocent and they have histories and undercurrents, of which we may not be aware. Bali, for example as one popular destination, has a bloody history of resistance to foreign interference. However, travellers will continue to go to these destinations. I will look at four artists who have undertaken such journeys. They are Ian Fairweather, who journeyed on his raft to Roti in Indonesia, Michael Stevenson, who has recreated Fairweather’s raft on more than one occasion; and the modern nomads Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. I will also return to a significant journey of my own, i.e. the 1993-94 journeys along the Stuart Highway from Darwin to Alice Springs, Adelaide and finally to Sydney as part of the NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER Project with artist collaborator Cath Bowdler.

**The Raft**

I first became aware of Ian Fairweather while living in Darwin and was frequently drawn to where his wrecked boat/house, the ‘Karu’ at Bullocky Point, had been beached. A plaque now stands where the old boat was. As late as the 1980-90s I met similar wanderers living in similar wrecks, all along the mangrove-lined shores of Darwin Harbour. The Raft voyage, starting on 29 April 1952, brought together all the strands of Fairweather’s life in one cathartic climax. This fragile raft and the voyage to Roti have a particular place in this evolution of identity of ‘artist as outsider’. It is a fascinating, if terrifying, example of the extreme that the travelling impulse can drive a person to. Yet it is not an event in isolation; the waters of the Arafura and Timor seas have been traversed by a variety of crafts and rafts for

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314 Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Travel Advisories Indonesia, smartraveller.gov.au 15/09/2008

Fairweather sailed for Timor on the night of 29 April 1952. Sixteen days later the raft bumped over the reefs at the village of Oepau, the last dot of habitation on Roti Island before the Indian Ocean and what would have been oblivion for Fairweather.\textsuperscript{318} Having been rescued by the local inhabitants Fairweather proceeded to make things difficult for the various authorities, by claiming his British citizenship in a tense, newly independent Indonesia where Britain had supported the former colonial master, the Dutch. He was deported first to Singapore and then Britain, finally returning to Australia in mid-August 1953. The Raft was in part inspired by his reading of *Kon-Tiki* and can be seen as yet one more event in the extremely long contact between north Australia and Asia. The raft is an evocative image, adrift and at the mercy of the sea. Anthropologist Alan Thorne describes how rafts could have evolved in island Asia, using bamboo and drifted/sailed to north Australia as long as 40 000 years ago.\textsuperscript{319} Fairweather


\textsuperscript{318} Murray Bail, *Fairweather* (Australia: Murdoch Books, 2008), 103.

\textsuperscript{319} Alan Thorn and Robert Raymond, *Man on the Rim the Peopling of the Pacific* (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1989).
demonstrated it was not a one-way voyage. The Macassan contact and interaction with northern Indigenous Australia, explored by the Archaeologist C. C. Macknight, have a long history.\textsuperscript{320} The ongoing incursions into Australian waters, especially at Ashmore Reef by Indonesian fishermen who regard these waters as theirs by immemorial right, again challenges our own tropes of possession. This is the arena of the other … where we are the true other. What is relevant to this exegesis however is the nature of Fairweather’s extreme condition while on the raft: sixteen days of increasing desperation and delirium before being blown over the reef on Roti Island. In these days of drifting on the Arafura Sea, the external and internal worlds of his existence flowed together, and he saw things that were certainly not there. Though Fairweather rarely if ever explained his working methods, the raft apparently brought together everything he had done and the places he had visited, allowing Fairweather to examine his own life and achievements. Whether by intent or not, Fairweather achieved something unique on the raft, best described if not understood in a Taoist sense:

First knowing, like deepest knowing, cannot be thought. The sounds and markings of words only point. All the turning of thought cannot follow to the beginning of the beginning. It is dark chaos, the undivided nameless. First knowing is lost in the darkness of first beginning. It was before thinking, before distinctions.\textsuperscript{321}

The experience of the raft allowed a winnowing of those elements no longer relevant or sidetracking him. No longer did he paint beautiful images from around him and his travels; rather, he explored their ever-ambiguous meaning to him, his life and his journey. Horizon lines after the raft rarely appeared, the viewpoint was close in and intense.

What was Fairweather’s motive for undertaking the raft voyage? His state of mind in Darwin in the proceeding years was, according to Bail, ‘disturbed’.\textsuperscript{322} Mary


\textsuperscript{321}Ray Grigg, \textit{The Tao of Being} (UK: Elements Books Limited, 1997), 1.

\textsuperscript{322}Murray Bail, \textit{Fairweather} (Australia: Murdoch Books, 2008), 94.
Eagle, in her catalogue essay for the retrospective exhibition ‘Fairweather’ of 1994, at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane\textsuperscript{323} suggests that Fairweather was not trying to get to Bali as is commonly assumed, but England, to find out why his work was not arriving in a fit state to be shown. Others have stated a desire to return to Bali and Timor to meet a friend. As I suggested in Chapter One, while all and any of these scenarios may have been an influence on Fairweather, I would speculate that the raft journey may well have been the destination, a solitary space albeit highly provisional in its ability to guarantee survival, where Fairweather could work out his next move and come to terms with his dementing internal images, constant poverty and a feeling in Darwin of being trapped in a backwater. Such a dramatic, and to our eyes eccentric, action would appear to be madness but to Fairweather it may have been the way to clarity through extreme action. This highlights the difficulties of interpreting Fairweather’s motives and movements in his travels, and why the raft voyage is so pivotal to understanding Fairweather’s aesthetic progress.

As Eagle states:

\begin{quote}
His paintings before the raft journey had been attractive, even beautiful, and carried the seeds of great style, but the subjects belonged to the relatively unambitious genre of tourist scenes.\textsuperscript{324}
\end{quote}

The same could not be said after this tumultuous event. Fairweather drew a line in the sand under his earlier life and turned it into the subject of his subsequent work. This became a constant translation of Fairweather’s memories into signs and signifiers of the events of travel in Fairweather’s own style. Eagle believes that Fairweather’s later work needs to be understood as a constant rewriting of his journeys.\textsuperscript{325} While I agree, we also need to see Fairweather’s life not as a series of periods and trials or experiences but a continuous flow of experiences mediated through the act of painting.

\textsuperscript{324}Ibid., 26. 
\textsuperscript{325}Ibid., 26
The raft was the necessary catalyst for a spiritual sacrifice of all that had preceded this journey; it focused Fairweather on his own mortality and the necessity to clarify his intent as an artist. Certainly Murray Bail indicates this, believing that Fairweather would otherwise have been a footnote, ‘a painter of pleasant Oriental scenes’. Instead Fairweather became the creator of *Monsoon*, seen below, his exploration into a personal heart of darkness. Adrift on the raft, Fairweather was sucked into the black maw of a monsoonal front while tied to this frail storm-tossed fragment, an echo of Odysseus on his raft. Like Odysseus, Fairweather was tossed up onto a shore after a battering by storm in extremis, and was helped by those who discovered the emaciated artist.

Did Fairweather take *The Odyssey* as a model? I do not think so, however he was a man educated in the classical tradition of his time and I would suggest that Fairweather would have been conversant with the great wanderer’s trials in which raft voyages figure prominently. Odysseus was washed up onto Calypso’s island home on a raft, and escaped on another to be finally beached at the feet of

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Nausicaa, daughter of the king of the Phaeacians, on Scheria, which may be modern day Corfu in the Ionian Islands off the west coast Greece.\textsuperscript{328} The complexity of Fairweather’s character could mean that these admittedly speculative scenarios of influence may have been at work in the artist’s ‘disturbed mind’ at the time.\textsuperscript{329} With a need to escape, a way to clear himself of past dead-ends and difficult personal passages, after the raft, like Odysseus Fairweather found a ‘home,’ his on Bribie Island, but not before taking firm, decisive action to follow a necessary but dangerous passage.

Writing and rewriting, as stated by Eagle, is the key to the relationship between the connection of the internal and external worlds of the artist and the traveller, and indeed the purpose of the artist-nomad. In the case of Fairweather, the language of his exploration was created through the signs and symbols of his memory and experiences. Returning from the delirious edges of the raft voyage, Fairweather was capable of extrapolating the symbols and meanings of his personal internal language into his art with force and confidence. This was Fairweather’s own nomad strategy. His long travels have a curious quality. For example, his need for solitude was emphasised in the 2005 Lismore Gallery Exhibition entitled, ‘Ian Fairweather An Artist of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century’.\textsuperscript{330} The attraction of his last long resting place, Bribie Island was, according to Robert Walker, who photographed Fairweather extensively in his later years, its peace, beauty and the animals of the island as well as the self-containment he achieved.\textsuperscript{331} Other interviews, especially with his nieces Sheila Barlow and Helga McNamara in 1975, conducted by Robert Walker, refer to Fairweather’s attraction from an early age to solitary explorations of his environment. Mrs McNamara related a particular episode that showed this independence and desire for solitary discovery:

\textsuperscript{329} Murray Bail, \textit{Fairweather} (Australia: Murdoch Books, 2008), 94.
\textsuperscript{331} ibid., 28-30.
He used to go off on his bicycle. It’s all sand dunes and five miles of sand. And in the middle there’s this little fort – a little Martello tower – and he used to spend the night there, and then the tide used to come up, you see, and cut him off. He was always a loner.332

The beach Mrs McNamara is referring to is St Owens, on the English Channel Island of Jersey where Fairweather grew up and then returned to after his World War One experience as a prisoner of war, an experience that marked him for life.333 When I consider the raft and the perilous voyage that Fairweather undertook, and read this observation from his niece, forty years before, then the impulse and the enormous chances he took make sense, in the light of his search for solitude. At the beginning of this chapter I included an image of Michael Stevenson’s own reconstruction of the raft, though to my knowledge, no image exists of the original. Stevenson did not attempt a prolonged voyage, but this photographic record is part of his ongoing project based around the voyage. His 2004 video documented the building, launching and attempted sailing of the raft to Sheppey, off the coast of Kent. Yet even this short voyage is just that, ‘a voyage’ by a tiny, crude, craft that drifts rather than sails. To cast off, to go to sea, especially on a crude raft such as this, is to step into another existence; even the simplest voyage on the sea is not undertaken lightly, as I know from personal experience. As an exploration of solitariness, the sea provides, even today, the perfect arena to envisage such a unique state, alone. Yet that apparently was the price the artist was prepared to pay, a gamble with chance and fate. While accounts exist of the night Fairweather cast off, no image to my knowledge exists of the complete raft with Fairweather leaving on it. The image of Stevenson on the reconstructed raft may be the closest we will ever come to visualising that night in 1952 when Fairweather left everything behind. Perched on top of his raft, the first impression one has of the voyager is just how vulnerable and frail Stevenson looks, even on the totally smooth sea off the Whitstable Beach of Kent. Imagine the thoughts of Fairweather, as he set out, surely knowing he would face

332 Ibid., Interview by Robert Walker with Ian Fairweather’s Nieces Shiela Barlow and Helga McNamara, UK, 1975, 53.
333 Ibid., 53.
a test that could be fatal.

The great explorations of chance and solitariness that came after the raft were built on the lessons of his earlier wanderings, especially in China. I believe Fairweather, possibly in Darwin, came to the conclusion that the language of his painting up to then was no longer adequate to take him where he needed to explore. Where did he turn but to the most enriching periods in his travels, China, because the middle kingdom supplied him with a way out of a paralysing dilemma through Calligraphy allowing the creation of a language unique to the artist/calligrapher. It this individualisation of this symbolic, subtle language/art form, China’s unique gift to creativity, that freed Fairweather from the painting of beautiful but safe tourist genre scenes, to become the explorer of his own memories by, as Eagle says, writing and rewriting those memories. He was painting ‘paintings’ not travel scenes; the act of marking the painted surface created the space for subconscious and ambiguous perceptions to flow. He was well acquainted with Chinese on vernacular and written levels. As well, in Beijing he had visited at least one of the great calligraphic masters. This melding of various non-western as well as modernist painting input (Fairweather read the London-based arts magazine Studio) created the force in Fairweather’s later works. The Indonesian officials sent Fairweather to Singapore, and then England, after landing on Roti Island. After these experiences, he had the seeds for his late explosion of deeply original work through melding different influences in his life, and excoriating the past to make it ‘past’. Calligraphy allowed Fairweather to play with signification on multiple levels. A constantly ambiguous line, form and colour apparently breaking up and reforming as does the calligraphic stroke always in the act of becoming, it is form, flow, action and meaning all at once without being pinned to a single reading of the artist’s intent. Fairweather echoed a Taoist-like conceptualisation of meaning that cannot be compelled to explain itself and if it is, then it is not the

337 Ibid., 26.
‘Tao’. Eagle says of such works as *Monsoon* (Fig. 47) that, ‘Inevitably the surface does not sum up the content of the painting, which is literally much deeper.’

![Image of artwork](image)

**Fig. 31**: Ian Fairweather. *Raft Sketch*: c.1957, 140mm x 135mm, biro on paper, Geoffrey Fairweather, Ledbury, UK. Murray Bail. *Fairweather*. Murdoch Books, Australia, 2008, p. 107.

**Roti arrival and aftermath**

Fairweather was treated with wary kindness by the local inhabitants of Roti after his spectacular arrival over the Roti reefs, as related by Northern Territory Historian Peter Spillett. In 1984 Spillett met several of the island’s inhabitants, while researching Macassan and Timorese voyages to north Australia. Fairweather arrived emaciated in the coastal settlement of Oepau where, according to Spillett’s informants, he spent about a week staying in a house in Papela. One islander, Bapak Raja Syion, remembers Fairweather’s arrival as ‘… that day when the stranger arrived on an even stranger craft.’

Little of the raft survives; what does is apparently guarded by the islanders of Roti,
including the nose-cone off one of the drop tanks, as seen in the photo below. It is a potent symbol, in its stubborn, fragmented survival, of the risks and freedoms of travel the never-ending spell of horizons and it has, for such a battered piece of metal, a magnetic allure.

Fairweather’s voyage is the purest expression of the space, between leaving and arriving as can be imagined. The voyage is a space entirely devoid of contact until Roti Island (except for one incident with local pearl divers on a lugger, whose help a deranged Fairweather refused). What was left psychologically of the wanderer, certainly a fragile and vulnerable figure, who had travelled where few people would be prepared to venture? Having survived by the barest of margins though not unscathed, Fairweather was now equipped to enter a very special space, his own memory, and that was certainly a solitary space open only to him.

Fig. 32: Roti islanders and the nose-cone of Ian Fairweather’s raft, 1987. Photo by Peter Spillett, courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia.
Earlier in this exegesis I mentioned the writing of Jim Macbeth, who coined the description ‘Affirmative Deviance’ to describe those who choose to deliberately live a life many of us would find eccentric. Fairweather, though in search of solitude, found himself in the company of a surprising group of broadly like-minded individuals. If Australia was used as a space of exile for England’s unwanted at its foundation, it also acted as a convenient place to send the ‘black sheep’ of English wealthy classes. Fairweather’s existence and relation to his own family of origin contain elements of this pattern. After the raft voyage and his return to England, Fairweather, as has been recorded by numerous commentators, worked for a year of hard labour in an English winter before ‘sending around the hat’ to his relatives to raise his fare to Australia. Fairweather’s commitment to a nomadic existence, including the extreme trial of the raft voyage, parallels his commitment to painting not as a career or hobby, but as a driving force in his life. Murray Bail states that Fairweather undertook a long conversation with himself, concerning the nature of his life while travelling to Peking (Beijing) in 1933. As Bail says:

The night spent in a monastery on T’ai Shan affected Fairweather in lasting ways. Temple bells faintly rang and snow fell. After seeing in the morning women with bound feet making the climb, he realised he was becoming soft – spiritually, artistically and physically soft. Sitting at a desk in Shanghai was not the way to live. In Peking he went for a walk early one morning towards the Summer Palace, and sat down to make a sketch – and asked himself what was he doing. Where he was heading. He thought of his struggle to paint in London. “Was I forgetting it all.”

This quote captures something about Fairweather that may escape the notice of most of us; that is, he simply did not just throw himself to the mercy of circumstance. The quote indicates the considerable thought Fairweather brought to

the very existence of the artist, in their relationship to society at large and that his solution, his ‘nomad-strategy’, was solitude.

Curator of the Lismore Regional Gallery’s ‘Fairweather’ Exhibition in 2005, Steven Alderton suggests that Fairweather should be seen in the light of the 19th century Romantic Movement, when the outsider was lauded as the solitary creator/explorer with unique insight into the human subconscious. Alderton noted, ‘Romantic heroes frequently led. … ‘outsider’ lives.’ Alderton drew an interesting parallel between Fairweather’s solitary achievement as an artist and what he called his mutability and flux, referring back to the figure and the experienced world from the very edges of pure abstraction. The Lismore exhibition revealed that Fairweather was not just an interesting historical figure, but one still relevant to today and that this can be seen in the constant movement in his work, between abstraction and the exterior world. I would suggest Fairweather’s relevance also lies in his exploration and creation of interior languages of creativity derived from his solitary yet not quite hermit-like existence. These languages should be treated as short-lived phenomena rather than a grammar of structural rigidity that could be replicated. Each of Fairweather’s works conveys a feeling that he existed in the calm eye at the centre of the storm.

It is worth noting that the photographs taken by Robert Walker of Fairweather working in his hut/studio by kerosene lamp-light, (the Hut Series 1966) show him working in a decidedly harsh light in conditions most artists would recoil from. Dark shadows surround the artist, with his own shadow thrown across the paintings. One wonders, as an artist, how this peculiar and challenging work-space, affected the mark-making, colour and structure of Fairweather’s work. Does the harsh, flickering lamp light suggest something of the storm-filled nights he spent

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345 Ibid., 9.
346 Ibid., 10.
347 Ibid., 32-33.
on the raft? Certainly the great painting *Monsoon* of 1961-62 (fig. 47) refers to the moments before Fairweather was swallowed by the storm fronts of the same name.348

![Image of Fairweather Hut Series (detail)](image)


The image of Fairweather painting in the semi-dark flickering light of the kerosene lamp poses another question. While modern galleries tend to show Fairweather’s work in the bright, steady light of the gallery space, many of the paintings and certainly those of the Bribie Island period were visualised and completed by lamplight. While lamplight is certainly not steady, it does have one interesting quality: it can cause images to appear to move and in the subdued atmosphere of such light, it can evoke a far different relationship to the work than would be found in a contemporary gallery. The images I reproduced in Chapter One of PNG dancers were photographed in such a light and the drama of that light combined with the blackness of the night and the movement of the spectacularly decorated dancers seems to me to have some of the qualities Fairweather’s work would have in the subdued, moving light of his hut. Fairweather spent some time in Bali in 1933, living in a ‘kampong’ at Buleleng on the north Bali coast.349 Murray Bail suggests he also stayed in a house with some Americans.350 Already Bali was attracting a steady stream of western visitors such as Walter Spiers, whom

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348 I have stood before this wonderful work in the Perth Art Gallery and was taken back to such nights on board my own and other vessels at sea. It is evocative of cold, wet and frightening nights that are also highly exhilarating and awe-inspiring.
350 Ibid., 21.
Fairweather visited, and later Donald Friend.351 Did Fairweather see the Wayang puppet theatres done with moving shadows and subdued light, or dances done by fire and lamplight? Almost certainly, the drama of these events may well have been stored in Fairweather’s mind for future exploration.

I have concentrated on the raft and China so far when discussing Fairweather, however the influence of his other journeys should not be underestimated. Ian Fairweather travelled great distances all his life and in a great variety of countries including Australia. The influence of that other great cultural magnet, India, should not be forgotten. Murray Bail, in his monograph on Fairweather, emphasises how extensive his travels were and how aware he was of various influences from the cultures and societies he travelled in.352 China may have supplied Fairweather with a model for the artist scholar and India may well have awakened him to the great traditions of the Sanyassin or Sadhus, ascetics who renounce all worldly possessions to travel perpetually. Bail considered that Fairweather would have seen similarities, possibly unintended, between his position and those of the Indian ascetics.353 The similarity between such wandering mendicants and Fairweather is striking, though as essayist Pierre Ryckmans points out, it would have been most unlikely for a personality of such radical originality and independence ever to indulge in what would have amounted to a form of theatrical pose.354 Though Ryckmans is referring to Chinese models of wandering artist/scholars, the same may be said for Indian counterparts. Ryckmans contended that aspects of Fairweather’s behaviour that are inexplicable, indeed seem even suicidal to a western view, would be explainable to eastern religious and secular travellers.355 Fairweather never saw the world through the single eye of a purely western traveller. The collected influences and experiences of his life, together with his long estrangement from England, precluded this possibility. It took the

351 ibid., 22.
353 Ibid.
355 Ibid.
catharsis of the raft to pull the artist into the space of the artist-nomad once and for all.

**Argonauts**

The Fairweather voyage remains a potent symbol for artists, myself included. Another so affected is Michael Stevenson who, from only a drawing of the raft, created the much-travelled exhibition ‘Argonauts of the Timor Sea’. Stevenson recreated and dismantled the raft at least twice. The exhibition including the raft (titled ‘The Gift’ in the exhibition) moved from England to Germany, to a recreation in the most recent APT Triennial in Brisbane and was also shown in Sydney.

Plainly the raft’s symbolic impact is undiminished. This fragile vessel resonates with meaning, a metaphor for risk and adventure rather than merely a historical oddity. This has become an imaginary voyage as well as an historical event. Just how fragile the original raft was and how hard to control was related to me by Peter Spillett in a short phone conversation I had with him in 1992. Spillett had seen Fairweather launch the raft in Fanny Bay but he had misjudged the tides, which have phenomenal power in Darwin Harbour. Fairweather had to wait several hours to try again and local inhabitants were apparently convinced that, once launched, they would never see Fairweather again.

Yet in the context of the gallery the raft lacks something; it is static and the unique motion of floating, sailing is evacuated. Stevenson may have recognised this feature because, as already noted the artist, with the help of Sea Scouts, built, launched and attempted to sail a version of the raft to the island of Sheppey in England. There is only one ‘Raft’. Stevenson, in this context, was wise to name his reconstruction ‘The Gift,’ alluding to the reciprocity of Fairweather towards his

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356 Conversation between Peter Spillett and myself, July 1992.
saviours on Roti Island by leaving all he had – ‘The Raft’ – to them. Fairweather’s vessel was unique to him and the memory of that tough little craft is his gift to all of us – a gift of possibility and a warning. He indicates just how far you may have to go as an artist-nomad, if you leave the known and travel with your eyes open in the space between the boundaries. Travel at this level is highly problematic – it is literally a casting of yourself onto the seas. Irish hermit-monks were reported to cast themselves adrift in skin boats, without oars or supplies, during the early years of the Catholic Church in the far west of Europe so as to test their faith by accepting God’s will as to their fate.\(^{357}\) I believe that Fairweather’s voyage needs to be seen in this tradition of extremely spiritual, frequently solitary, journeys that cauterise the present from the past.

Fig. 34: Michael Stevenson, New Zealand b. 1964. The Gift (from ‘Argonauts of the Timor Sea’). 2004, gelatine silver photograph on paper ed. 1/15 39 x 56.4 cm. Purchased 2004 The Queensland Government’s Gallery of Modern Arts, Acquisition Fund Collection, Queensland Art Gallery.

In an interview with artist/writer Wes Hill in Art & Australia, Stevenson described building the raft as not creating a replica but ‘doubling.’ He said:

\(^{357}\) Tim Severin The Brendan Voyage (UK, Arrow Books, 1978)
Yes, it is a facsimile, mimicry or reconstruction that I am often dealing with. All are forms of doubling. I should say there are many different forms of doubling – I’m interested in them all. The doubling provides access to the historical but is not truly a relic.\textsuperscript{358}

Stevenson makes it clear that he was not interested in rewriting art history or in simply critiquing the myths that have grown around Fairweather. Rather, he was interested in the role economics played in the nature of Fairweather’s practice as well as his methods of travel. Frequently destitute and living below the poverty line, Fairweather decided to build the raft as an extreme reaction to his circumstances in Darwin in 1952 and as an escape into solitude. As Stevenson pointed out, Fairweather apparently was living in virtually a barter economy and says:

After 17 days at sea he made landfall on the edge of the Indonesian archipelago, the local police eventually interned him but, after claiming British citizenship, he was finally deported to London. In southern England he did hard labour to pay his debt to the British crown. Throughout this process it seems no money changed hands.\textsuperscript{359}

In this context we can reread Fairweather’s voyage. It was not just Darwin to Indonesia; the journey took him back to his own beginnings and returned to Australia by the strangest of routes. This takes nothing away from the raft voyage of Fairweather, but it does make it a part of something larger and eventually linked to the whole journey of the artist’s life. It also places the artist’s life and circumstances very much at odds with the materialist expectations of much of mainstream Australian society, then and now. Meanwhile, a connection of many levels has been created between a rusty old nose-cone in Indonesia, and a recreated symbol of that artefact’s journey in its current resting place. The building of ‘The Gift’ with the help of Sea Scouts used no nails and reflected ancient building techniques from the Pacific, such as binding of the parts to make a wobbly whole.

\textsuperscript{358} Wes Hill, “Double Fantasies: The Artful Practice of Michael Stevenson.” \textit{(In Art & Australia, Vol. 46/3, Autumn 2009)}, 466. \\
Having been built this way, both rafts was easily dismantled back into their constituent parts and scattered between the people of Roti, in an act of reciprocal kindness by Fairweather to the islanders for saving his life. Darwin was a surprisingly appropriate place to create the raft and to depart from, as the town until recently had a transient impermanent feeling and its very existence was often debatable. As I mentioned earlier, Darwin has always harboured a floating, no-fixed-address population of beachcombers, runaways and black sheep as well as a myriad of artists, myself included. With its benign dry season climate it is possible to live outside most of the time. Until the early 1990s a considerable population of people regarded as ‘undesirable’ lived in Darwin. In 1952 Fairweather lived a similar life as the transient ‘long-grass’ communities of today, on Bullocky Point, on the Karu, a beached patrol vessel. His informal connections with this community can again only be speculated on. However my conversation with Peter Spillet in 1992 left the impression that Fairweather did have a social network and found the situation at least partly congenial, as he did Malay-Town in Cairns earlier. The apparent misery he felt in Darwin may be due more to the pressing problems he felt about the way his painting was going and less about the place; his age (Fairweather was sixty-one) may have had a bearing on his state of mind were he to have any lasting success. The raft did not happen in a void: while Fairweather may certainly have been a solitary traveller in Darwin, he just may have been in the one community in Australia with a fringe society capable of accepting him. Russell Drysdale in Journey Amongst Men also describes a far northern population that is primarily made up of very strange characters. An in-between place from Torres Strait to Broome, with its own circumstances and sense of impermanence, a space of possibility hard to comprehend from the distance of the southern states of Australia. It is still a harsh inter-tidal zone of exchange, cross-cultural and social mixing despite the efforts of vested interests to maintain a white Australia hegemony. The Voyage happened in a context of a community,

360 This was from a phone conversation I had with the late Mr Spillett in 1992, as he was about to fly to Kupang in West Timor to study Timorese sea craft.
361 Murray Bail, Fairweather (Australia: Murdoch Books, 2008), 266.
where anything was possible and accepted by the equally independent inhabitants of the fringe. The northern capital, from my own personal experience, has a flow of dreamers and travellers looking for ways to get overseas cheaply; all kinds of vessels are used and travellers are always looking for boat crew positions at the yacht clubs. In this sense one should not see Fairweather as alone as his life might suggest; rather he joins a very diverse company of travellers, as Kim Cheng Boey did in 1997 when leaving Singapore to travel amongst the ‘no-fixed-address’ travellers of the world.363

Caravans

By contrast, two artists who have apparently made nomadism the subject of their practice, are Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. These two vagabond artists have, as the art critic Edward Colless notes, made use of ‘… their own nomadism for the subject as well as the substance of their art.’364

It is a form of self-conscious travel, documenting, dismantling and stacking the detritus of temporary homes and residencies. It is a constant interaction with both others and their histories, frequently lost and unrecorded until Healy and Cordeiro arrive. A notable work was produced during their Berlin residency in 2006. The work, Flatpack 2006, references the way whole homes come ready to erect in the ubiquitous flatpack. Whole lives, as measured by the objects consumed (or about to be), can be ready made for use, easy and convenient. Yet the subject of this particular set of flatpacks has a history, which the artists know will be a poignant reminder of a life of otherness, loss and struggle for survival between the old East/West divide of post-World War Two Europe. A caravan, of the type so often seen on Australian roads in the 1950s, has been reduced by Healy and Cordeiro to its constituent parts and stacked in the gallery space. Flatpack was exhibited in 2006 at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanian in Berlin. The accompanying documentation

introduces us to the solitary life of an unknown woman who lived for forty years in this flimsy little streamlined box on wheels, parked in one spot, mute and forgotten on the edge of the East-West divide in Berlin. This treatment introduced a contradiction: the Flatpack, while it can be moved, also negates the caravan’s primary task, that of providing a mobile shelter. It continued the fate of this now-no-longer-mobile symbol of the nomad, by parking it yet again in one spot a gallery instead of a parking lot, where would it be most at home.

My own memories are stirred by this encounter with a small plywood structure, so impossibly fragile yet, like the raft, enduring. My family along with thousands of others, travelled the east coast of Australia with such a caravan behind a blue 1963 Falcon station wagon, from Sydney to Kiama and the azure beaches of the south coast. Amazingly, as I started this section of writing I found an old and highly faded photograph of our caravan in its last resting place, the backyard of our house on Palmers Island, northern New South Wales.

Fig. 35: Caravan owned by my family, circa 1975, collection of the author.

Memories such as the usual flotsam of holidays, now fading pictures of family, an
accident in Kiama, (luckily the van did not jackknife or I would not be writing this) are brought to the surface by one simple signifier. Snow on the mountains near Tumut, the car overheating and my father jumping back as a geyser of boiling water from the radiator spewed onto a gravel back-road. These incidents and memories are as much as part of my journey as my later travels, my nostalgia for the freedom of movement they represent only increases my own wanderlust. These little caravans join the raft on perpetual journeys; for a moment I am on the nomad path, full of synchronicities. Within this remembering are the seeds of a liminal space between the conscious and the unconscious, on personal and intimate levels.

I would be hesitant to conclude that artists such as Healy and Cordeiro are strictly nomads; instead their travel takes them from residency to exhibition, a post-modern nomadism that operates in very safe and defined ways. The materials of their practice, while certainly localised to the site they work in (collected detritus found in the surrounding area,) can also be seen as souvenir-gathering on a gigantic scale. Even when transformed through the collective creative processes of the artists, it mostly stays where it is. Flatpack was exhibited in Australia at Gallery Barry Keldoulis, being one of the few works capable of being transported, albeit through industrial modes of transportation. Their space of travel appears as a compressed line, straight over rather than flowing and living within the experience of the route. Artists using this mode of production and travel risk defining themselves as ‘sedentary travellers’ in the armchair of the aircraft cabin, pressurised, cocooned and isolated from the very sites they wish to interact with. Such residency opportunities may place the artists in the position of the tourist rather than the traveller. The actual space of the journey is folded away, an inconvenient waste of time, jumping across time zones, cultures, people other artists. I have noticed just how hard it really is for these dropped-in artists to really meet anyone on anything other than a superficial level, through various Artist-in-residence programs at University of Newcastle. Even their names disappear

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365 The term ‘sedentary traveller’ was coined by Syed Manzurul Islam to differentiate one of two distinct ways of travel in the Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka.
quickly; perhaps a workshop, perhaps an exhibition or lecture, one is left wondering whom they really meet. At the other end of the scale I do remember one residency of great success in Darwin at Charles Darwin University then School of Visual Arts. The artist was Stelarc, who explored his use of bionic appendages, building some, holding workshops and a spectacular performance on the university grounds. I used the bionic arm Stelarc developed in Japan and it is an unnerving experience. This residency created a site of excitement, interchange and challenge and is the one I use as the measure for other residencies I see. However this is the exception, and the extensive network that now exists of residencies around the world needs to be approached carefully lest it develops into a travelling circus for artists, curators and art spaces at the risk of negating the excitement and challenges of travel itself.

**Space and time**

As critic Geraldine Barlow notes of Stevenson’s ‘Argonauts of the Timor Sea’ exhibition [at Darren Night Gallery Sydney] the space between borders on Australia’s and other national boundaries has become increasingly defined, rigid and patrolled. Barlow states:

> Perhaps the most poignant questions of value raised by Stevenson’s *Argonauts of the Timor Sea* are those related to the freedom of movement. Our contemporary world abounds with borders, we make them within ourselves, between one another and we chart borders between state and nation, legal and illegal. There is now very little trace of even a freedom to flee. Australian Government policy has now established a defensive cordon over the very waters Fairweather navigated in 1952. The Australian Navy maintains a patrol to warn off decrepit and overloaded Indonesian fishing boats of asylum seekers.366

The nature of travel since Fairweather set sail has become considerably different as the means of travelling and the controls on travellers have grown more complex.

On one hand our ability to go from departure point to destination has become easier, faster and relatively comfortable. On the other hand it has transformed the nature of our relationship with the ‘other’. Is it safer and have we lost the essential space of the road in the hurry to get somewhere? These are not just rhetorical questions. The evolving nature of travel and its speed means shrinkage of the time spent travelling. Equally, the World Wide Web and the very number of travellers who write of their experiences has led to a vast expansion of the knowledge a traveller can have of a destination before they leave home. Yet for me the space of the road is the essential space, a transformative space, not to be traded for the advantages of comfort or security that is all too often illusionary.

On the way, the contextual distances between cultures become apparent. Nicholas Jose, analysing the China/Australia relationship said:

Different countries do not map neatly on to each other. Countries cannot “mesh” thoroughly. The profoundest connections are unpredictable ones, and are often quite trivial at the outset. The translators, the mediators, the bridging people are our society’s eyes and ears in this process, out in front, their antennae picking up the crackle in the air that means there is a message that wants to get across.

I first read this passage in Singapore, as I became increasingly involved in the Singaporean experience of place. I was aware of just how the edges of the map did not mesh; spaces open up on these edges of the map and these were the creative spaces in people’s houses where they held exhibitions and created the dialogue of cultural change. The Singaporean experience was unique: while a materially very rich space, the power elite had definite ideas of their right to watch, control and direct in the cultural, social, political in exchange for security of housing, employment and national identity. The artists I knew always watched what they said, did and exhibited, especially as the Singaporean authorities were quite prepared to close down and use draconian censorship laws.

It is a highly random, hit-and-miss business, in which misperception and fantasy play as important a part as accurate mutual apprehension. And
the points of connection are not always flattering. In searching for the ‘fit’, it’s necessary to recognise the points of non-connection too. And, since opposites can attract, the points of resistance, even repulsion, may also reveal relationships, as between the twin halves of a duality.

The Singapore political elite attempt to present one united identity for all Singaporeans; English is used as the language glue to hold the populace together. Yet the creative moments came hit-and-miss through listening to the crackle in the air. Seemingly trivial remarks, chance meetings and frequent misinterpretation could unleash exciting opportunities as we engaged in building spaces of creativity with artists such as ‘Green Zeno’, willing to subtly challenge the constructed identity of their city-state through performance and installation, hybrid dance forms and new media-based work. Finding these artists was for me the greatest gift of travel and to be associated for a while with this dynamic and often subversive work an exciting intersection in my life.

The relationship in this regard, between place and journey becomes, as Lucy Lippard (in her autobiographical book of personal travel *Lure of the Local*) points out, ‘a fascinating series of juxtapositions’. This journey in space and time, Lippard maintains, helps us see our homes and our places of departure as past, we are different in every return. As well, those sites shape our journeys and our ‘selves’ as a forever changing internal terrain of shifting ground and dialogues. The act of travel for the artist-nomad puts our conceptualisation of home into another perspective, as a place we once lived in, now separated from us by distance and memory. Home is as much an imagined space, as a destination. Those memories of home mix with the histories of place, to create unique stories that frequently slip through the cracks of official recording, but remain palpable in our lives and the lives of communities. They are our memories and inhabit our subconscious rising to remind us of our pasts, the present and possibilities of the future.

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My references to my own journeys and journals from PNG to the present quarry my own memory and expose a nebulous sense of place for me. I am left wondering, am I a collector of memories or an interpreter of my own progress? Every traveller, even the most casual of sightseer, must return with a stock of images to say ‘look where I have been’ — who would believe they had ever left home without them. Yet I have a suspicion that I no longer have a sense of home, but rather my journals hold a memory of such a place.

Even though I have physically lived in Newcastle, Australia, for nearly a decade, the years of movement have erased a sense of place that I would call home; it evades me. As I look at my work I am forcibly reminded just how much restlessness drives me, how I have become an émigré, even in my own country.

![Fig. 36: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Xenos Street. 2006, 1800mm x 2500mm, acrylic on canvas, collection of the author.](image-url)

The paintings that I am creating as part of this project, such as *Xenos Street* above (Fig. 36) twist numerous threads together, they are hybrid creations. The meaning of the Greek word ‘xenos’ was explained to me by a Greek friend; it means ‘stranger’

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369 Mark Keith Elliot-Ranken, Artist journals, 1984 to present, possession of the writer.
in Greek and is related to xenophobia, a suspicion of foreigners. The origin of the word is from the story of classical Greek general Xenophon (circa 430-354 BC) who led 10 000 Greek mercenaries to Asia Minor in a campaign against the then Persian Emperor, Artaxerxes II. After being betrayed, the Greeks, led by Xenophon, fought their way out again. Xenophon later wrote of his experiences and this book remained a standard text in Hellenic culture, as did his attitude to any non-Greeks, which was both suspicious and condescending.

Xenos Street is a street of strangers. How often are foreigners in our midst used as scapegoats? Not only in the distant past but also recently, and no doubt it will happen again. My travels have taken me to some exotic locations, and without exception fear of ‘others,’ by the ‘others’ I have met, has been part of the journey, especially in South Africa. It is a depressing but not unsurprising thought, easily exploited by hard-pressed ruling elites to bolster their own positions by inciting hatred of anyone who appears not to attempt to ‘assimilate’ or maintains a distinct cultural difference. When travelling beyond one’s own borders, confronting this reality will be a task for the artist-nomad if they wish to avoid unwittingly becoming a conquistador.

The space of the journey is itself and unrepeatable; each encounter is unique. No other person can have the same encounter as you. The journey offers an opportunity for you and you alone. I found this out on my own journey leaving Darwin in 1994. I was going to Alice Springs for the second stage of the NEVER NEVER Project and then on to Sydney for the final exhibition. The country to the centre had become very dry since my last time down the Stuart Highway. Outside the racially tense town of Tennant Creek I came across dead horses next to a bridge crossing over a dry creek. Like many creek crossings, it had been part of a network of watering places for cattle and horses at the turn of the century. The pumps and troughs were now broken, but the introduced horses still gathered there,

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370 The recent race riots at Cronulla in Southern Sydney used mobile phones and SMS messaging to call many Anglo-Australians to come to the beach and be ‘proud of being an Aussie’. Indiscriminate violence was used to intimidate and terrify women, passers-by, families and anyone not looking aggressively Australian.
looking for water. My painting *Incident at Dark Horse Creek* (Fig. 37) explores this experience: dead horses, victims of drought on the highway just outside Tennant Creek, the pump had failed and the horses died.

![Incident at Dark Horse Creek](image_url)

**Fig. 37:** Mark Elliot-Ranken. *Incident at Dark Horse Creek.* 2003, 1800mm x 1800mm, acrylic on canvas, possession of the author.

The mental images of this event on the road are still with me. I was alone and, even as the bodies lay there in the searing white light of the Territory, I could see their manes moving in the breeze, fluttering over the black shapes of dissolution. The journal entry of that day remains poignant when I read it. The painting recalls the confronting moment.\(^ {371} \)

The struggle for a language, to explore this meeting place of the external and the internal terrains is continuous, and art, after all, is the poetry

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\(^ {371} \) Mark Keith Elliot-Ranken, *Artists Journal 1994.* This incident occurred as I was leaving Darwin permanently to return to Sydney as part of the Never Never, Never Never Project. Possession of the artist.
of struggle. The nature of the moment, a short-lived though long-remembered phenomenon, pushed me to struggle with the visual language capable of ‘seeing again’ this event. The horses have long ago dissipated back into the land but the language of my experience of their death, has grown and changed and still evolves now; it has to or it too will die through rigidity. The moment is the moment and it can only be expressed by looking unflinchingly into the dark, a chaos that is pregnant with possibility, a passage a ‘Tao.’

Fig. 38: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *One Tree Island, Trikora Beach*. 1998, Artist journal Vol. 5, possession of the author.
CHAPTER SIX: Journeys

Sometimes it’s a little better to travel than to arrive.373

Robert M Pirsig

I opened my introduction to this exegesis by quoting Bruce Chatwin374 on the nature of the road as our natural home. In this way Chatwin acknowledges the space of the journey as unique and unknowable until an individual travels on that road, themselves, alone. Robert M Pirsig, in his classic road book of the 1970s, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, takes this further, arguing that the space of travel is an intimate opportunity for self-awareness. It is the true gift to any traveller, which cannot be shared but must be discovered alone. Marlow, the great creation of Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness, travels the Congo River into Africa at the height of western imperialism and is, even in the company of his peers, very much alone.375

This sense of being alone in travel is important, because while you may travel with others, they are not you and your experiences are unique. However, this being alone is important, because there is no strength in numbers when travelling as an artist-nomad and solitude in this situation heightens the sense of ‘being there’. Travel can change everything but only for those willing to be vulnerable, as such a mode of journeying needs to encompass an inner voyage as well as an external progress.

In my introduction, I stated that the passage and transformation from conquistador to artist-nomad was not easy. It involves engaging in ‘becoming-other,’ accepting

that the other is not mute or invisible and increasingly rejects the imposed binary relationship of the subject-object. The artist-nomad needs to engage actively with the possibility of new relationships in a third space where ‘becoming-other’ is possible through validating the gaze and voice of the ‘other’ as much as ourselves.

Travelling and living outside your own familiar culture can be challenging. The experiences of travel are layered, with the occasional moment standing stark and clear in our subconscious. It is in these moments, especially alone or in the company of like-minded others, that we will find our preconceptions challenged.

I will again refer to my Artist journals by examining an experience I had while living in Singapore in 1997. While travelling in the Riau islands south of Singapore I encountered (at a distance) a small flotilla of the ‘Orang Lau’ or Sea Gypsies, a remnant of an ancient nomadic culture that once was found all over the South-East Asian archipelagos. I was not alone, however the physical circumstances of this particular short journey, created a moment of ‘being there’ all the same.

**Memories of sea gypsies**

My journals recorded this experience in 1997, during the great haze from the burnings in Sumatra and Kalimantan, which shrouded much of South-East Asia and all of Singapore. The islands to the south, in the Malacca Strait, were also experiencing these fires. Forests were burning and the population was apprehensive; the fires also coincided with the financial meltdown of the markets, which destabilised the economies of this region in 1997.

A curious ennui seemed to me to pervade the air along with the smoke; the government could do nothing about the situation and this seemed to greatly unsettle the rulers of Singapore. Even the Singaporeans developed a sense of disbelief about the announcements by their government that all was under control. Suharto was soon to fall, Aceh explode, East Timor to reappear and the face of the
world to change almost before our eyes.\textsuperscript{376}

The islands to Singapore’s south were a constant escape for my partner Bernadette and me; we travelled there as often as we could. We went to Palau Battam and Palau Bintam, staying in accommodation all over the islands. Collectively they are known as the Riau group, a mini archipelago within the larger one of Indonesia and regarded as the home of the Malay language. Singapore uses Palau Battam as its industrial park and personal outlet for space-starved Singaporeans, as it is only thirty minutes by fast ferry from the Sentosa terminals.\textsuperscript{377}

In 1997 we took the ferry south to Palau Battam and stayed at the Turi Beach Resort, on the north-east coast of the island. Normally relaxing, the smoke gave this stay an unsettled quality of something out of control approaching. The beach stretched between two rocky headlands, and to the north was a small river where the ferries docked. I was standing on the beach one smoke-grey day, when the ‘sea gypsies’ sailed around the headland. The Orang Lau (sea gypsies’) boats, battered looking craft, Chinese lug-sail rigged with what looked like a covered wagon cabin on a worn sampan type hull, slid past my astonished gaze. Steered by a sweep, about a dozen or more sailed from one side of the panorama of smoke and sea, pewter-grey to the other side and I alone took any notice. My journal was in the room but the image was imprinted on my psyche because I had always longed to see them.

The small, forlorn flotilla disappeared north – what did they make of their burning world? Later when we embarked on the ferry to return to 20\textsuperscript{th}-century Singapore I saw one of the boats close up, working its way into an anchorage just below the bridge we had crossed to get to the terminal. A very tough-looking woman expertly used a Yuloh, a special sweep (oar) designed by the Chinese and dispersed all across south-east Asia, to move these small craft in such tight spaces. I had

\textsuperscript{376} M. K. Elliot-Ranken, Artists Journals, possession of the artist.
\textsuperscript{377} Ibid.
read about such devices but until now never seen one in action.  

At this point I did get the journal out and produced a few sketches, though my memory would never let me forget such a sight. Close-up, the boat and its occupant appeared even more battered and weather-beaten than before but equally, remarkably enduring. Did the woman in the boat see me, did our gazes cross, was the woman ever aware of me – or was I just another ‘tourist’, a background figure in her landscape of water and hard work? Almost certainly, this encounter reinforced the gulf between my romantic images of these sea nomads and the hard, precarious reality of their existence. It was a reality check similar to what I had experienced when I travelled to Africa in 1993, a gulf between the Sea Gypsies’ experience of life and my own privileged existence, by any measure a humbling experience.

The Orang Lau are survivors of an ancient nomadic culture, which lives in close proximity with the natural world of the sea and islands of South East Asia. Today they exist in pockets around the South China Sea, Indonesia and into the Bay of Bengal and Burma. It is a hard and dangerous life, constantly harassed by restrictive regimes to settle in one place; declining fish stocks and prejudice add to their woes. Writer Sebastian Hope titled his book on these nomadic people *Outcasts of the Islands the Sea Gypsies of South East Asia*, for indeed they are outcasts.  

Hope used a Malaysian name ‘Bajau Laut’, but these people go by many names and maintain a precarious independence. My journal of that time record my growing sense of unease at living in Singapore’s bubble-like existence of wealth, opulence and control.  

The journals also bring another set of memories: the smell of the sea and rivers, smells of a tropical island visited years ago, the smell smoke comes too, as well as a desire to return to these wonderful islands for a deeper immersion in the ebbs and flows of the Riau archipelago.

380 Mark Keith Elliot-Ranken, Artist journals, 1997-8.
Travel presents us with a constant series of triggers to our own past: time and place, touch, sound, taste and smell all intermixed with a distance, both physical and cultural, from the original moment. It is not just interesting scenes for illustration, but raw material of memory and language and a personal intoxication that cannot be denied. Our memories of journeys interact with our current existence in strange and often perplexing ways. It is difficult to see your original locale with the same eyes after such experiences. Travelling is a wasted effort, unless you are aware that the journey is as much internal as external. The destination is discovered in the act of doing, as a painting and the meaning are entwined in the act of doing.

I talk in this context less about facts and more about flavour, gut feelings and eddying currents in personal writings, drawing and small sketches. I am aware of this as I recall that day and those boats on the beach at Palau Battam. It is disconcerting to realise those outward events and internal concerns may be coming together in the strange ways of chance and will need skills of internal navigation to comprehend. To navigate the process of travel is a complex task and fraught with ambiguities. In Culture and Imperialism Edward Said put the traveller, as well as the cultures they carry with them, into a context of constant tension. Such travels through the territory of the ‘other’ are not as innocent as they seem. Even now our journeys are made in the echoes of imperial hegemonies, a concern running through the work of Joseph Conrad. Conrad, the chronicler/critic of the imperial project’s relationship with the ‘other,’ in itself an objectifying term, had an ambivalent relationship to the empire and society he explored, not the least because of his own background as a Polish émigré. He was at once an honoured insider and perpetual outsider in his own home, and his tales of the sea, travel and relationship grew from the dialogue between the wanderer-turned-writer and the colonisers’ need to rewrite the now silenced ‘others’ existence. Now I/we travel in an even more complex rubric of emergent ‘others’, with the hegemonic efforts of contending national entities, the hyper-fast, virtual reality webs of the Internet as

well as transnational companies who recognise no borders. Navigation has become even more complex; we may arrive faster with more prepacked information, but be less ready to move within the folds of the journey as the actual space of that journey can be so easily compromised and reduced to the ‘sedentary-tourist’ rather than the nomad-traveller’s experience with no possibility of change and realisation of the liberation that comes from ‘becoming-other’. My image from the Artist journal of 1992 that tells the narrative best touches on the Ned Kelly-like, ironclad outlook of so many tourists to this day. Drawn in Kupang, West Timor, no doubt it reflects some of my own attitudes of confusion and vulnerability. Kupang had grown over several visits I did from Darwin, to become a somewhat sleazy meeting place for sad middle-aged men, looking for not just compliant sexual partners but companionship of young women, to fit their stereotype of the submissive bride-to-be.

Fig. 39: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Post–card from Kupang II: The Young Man on his Asian Discovery Tour. 1992, Artist journal, Vol. 1, possession of the author.
Internal navigation

At any given moment of the day or night there is some spot on the Earth’s surface that is directly underneath the Sun.\textsuperscript{382}

My early desire to travel, especially by boat, (the least efficient but most romantic means to do so) led me to learn celestial navigation in my early twenties. This hard-acquired skill eventually leads me to the last anecdote of this inquiry. In 1982 I found myself on the deck of a small sloop called \textit{Stargazer}, between Queensland and New Caledonia trying to use a plastic sextant and stopwatch to find out in which ocean I and my fellow sailors were. This was the Coral Sea, with reefs ahead of us, and it was important to know at least approximately our position. Curiously, celestial navigation is really about comparing a series of informed guesses (Dead Reckoning), against the evidence of mathematical measurements of celestial bodies and time, to define the space one may be in. Unlike the now universally used ‘Geographical Positioning System’ (GPS) which is accurate to within centimetres, the celestial system of tables and sextants was definably more of an ‘Art’ with accuracy of position at best a few hundred metres, and frequently less in bad weather.

![Brass sextant by John Dolbond, early 19th century, UK.](image)

It is a much more skill- and experience-based system. Practice hones these navigational abilities rather than purchasing power of a small handheld unit; I have both sextant and GPS and it is the former which makes me dream of voyages again. As we travelled across the Coral Sea I made a discovery: not only could I navigate but to do so I had to imagine myself travelling within a bubble of space, what is called the ‘Celestial Sphere’ in navigation.\textsuperscript{383} When, as I did, you live within the confines of a city, you tend to see the world as if on a screen through the car window or TV, flat with no weather or movement. This may not seem obvious until you move into a clear space, either desert or sea. Then in a space on a journey a realisation slowly comes to you, that the space you are in is spherical and moving just as you move. Further, it is a space that is effectively porous and borderless, only bounded by the limits of sight. An important point in the art of navigation even today is the work and observations of other navigators who have travelled before you. This foundation of knowledge encircles the world; the sea also is not pathless just trackless in that no mark of man, save pollution, ever stays on its surface but is recorded in charts, song, poetry (\textit{The Rime of the Ancient Mariner} is one such great poem as is the \textit{Odyssey}), and publications such as \textit{Ocean Passages of the World} as well as more localised guides, which are frequently necessary on the cluttered coasts of the continents.

At night, especially if calm, this feeling of floating in a bubble of space becomes even stronger as the horizon dissipates. The surface of the sea and the space of the sky meld together and, for me, there was a feeling of floating in infinity. Only the gentle rocking of the vessel indicated that I was floating and underneath, the abyss. These revelations stay with me as flashes and traces, still a challenge to my everyday experiences of life, constantly reminding me of other existences and possibilities.

\textsuperscript{383}The term Celestial Sphere comes from the Marc St Hilliare method of navigation I learnt through the Altair School of Navigation in Sydney Australia during the 1970s.
Now, in this context I am writing about nomad-strategies and shedding conquistador armour; to do what? Return to that first realisation on Stargazer’s deck? No, such experiences cannot be relived. Rather, this different experience of space helps me to understand where my art is moving from, where it has come to and why it is important to stay in motion, both physically, culturally, psychologically and spiritually. These acts of navigation lead me to a curious point of departure, a new awareness of the purpose of the journey. The space of the journey is no longer simply ‘a space between’, but ‘a state of being’ unlike any other; no matter what the length of the journey; it is a state of freedom and contestation. What else is the purpose of journey except to be surprised, challenged, changed, and finally to arrive reinvented?

Again Syed Manzural Islam elucidates a message for the artist-traveller. To travel within the folds of the land one cannot travel like a sky god, like a conquistador, but with one’s eyes open even as the context of ourself, our very many-folded identity, changes again and again. In reflecting on my own condition as a traveller, I can see that the space of travel between departure point and destination is a unique, creative place, and a space offering the possibility to renegotiate one’s identity on a continuous basis. It is also a space of self-liberation through the realisation of the language of creativity that lies hidden within oneself. This space is however not innocent and is indeed crowded with others. It is a space moreover capable of degenerating into the illicit space of dubious adventures as described by Alison Broinowski. The occupation of this space is by ‘others’, who gaze on and have their own interpretation of our presence. The writer and sailor Mari Rhydwen in her book Slow Travel makes this a central observation as she moves across the Indian Ocean touching numerous ports and cultures along the way. To travel successfully one needs, not the armour of the Conquistador but

386 Mari Rhydwen, Slow Travel (Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 2004).
the multi-focal vision of the nomad-artist.

Travel itself has changed; it is no longer a slow boat somewhere, a linear progression from trading post to trading post or a conducted tour of a beauty spot or an interesting ruin. Visual imagery of the exotic, the ‘other’, has been flooding into our homes. Telecommunications, at a level unheard of even twenty years ago, have brought the distant to our doorstep. The Pacific, our regional place, has been imagined and re-imagined. The painted explorations by William Hodges from Cook’s second great Pacific voyage, has sold millions of package tours and shaped many escapist dreams.  

And painting

The encounter between ‘other’ and ‘us’ as experienced in travelling, has been an underlying concern of my work. It has influenced the nature of my painting and provoked the constant experimentation flowing through the body of my practice since at least my return from Papua New Guinea. There has been a gradual

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387 William Hodges, already a noted artist/traveller before being appointed as artist on Cook’s second voyage, created images which, as Bernard Smith notes, have shaped our view of the Pacific.
simplification, with the disappearance of the image, figure and stencilling that was prominent in such works as *Prime Meridian: Captain Bass Sails South 1996* (Fig. 62). *Prime Meridian* is an important example of my work from the period immediately before I went to Singapore. The painting contains themes and conceptional approaches still influential in my work today. The use of textural underpainting, the building of surface and colour, a restricted palette and an underlying structure of light and dark areas were prominent in this period and still are. I no longer use the device of the window and the image of the boat or stencilling, however, the interpretation and translation of signs and symbols, the internal language from my own psyche, as I work is just as prevalent today. The story of Bass and Flinders in *Tom Thumb* was standard fare in the teaching of the history of Australia, taught to me at school. The voyage south from Sydney Town by these two officers has remained a never-ending voyage of fascination for me. I can still imagine them turning south at the heads and sailing literally off the charts of the time.

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Fig. 42: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *Prime Meridian: Captain Bass Sails South*. 1996, 1000mm x 1000mm, acrylic on board and canvas, private collection.
Again and again I come back to that most basic of painterly relationships, that is the act of starting on the white canvas in front of me. A line, a splash or stroke, either on paper or canvas, growing ever more layered and complex, reveals and conceals its meaning in the folds of the paint. That first mark is the most telling; all the other marks will grow from that first one as it cuts open the white surface and goes into the painting. How can the simple vertical or horizontal mark-making process possibly be a tool to explore my own memorial conglomeration of experience? The line carries enigmas of its own, that do not divulge their meaning easily.

As I look at my recent works in particular, I am surprised at just how simple they are becoming. Works such as the *A Voyage to Patagonia* (2007) start from a mixture of my own memories (though I have not yet travelled to Patagonia), the writings of such travellers as Chatwin¹ and the histories of explorers in South

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Fig. 43: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *A Voyage to Patagonia*, 1800mm x 1500mm, acrylic on canvas, collection of the author.
America, another antipodean continent. *A Voyage to Patagonia* echoes earlier concerns of *Prime Meridian* in that it was, for a long time, off the maps.

The gesture has an ability to reconnect myself to where I have been. Memory often plays tricks, as Fairweather commented when discussing the raft voyage to Roti Island. 388 This voyage, this hallucinatory experience (through deprivation of almost all the taken-for-granted comforts), has fascinated me perhaps more than any other aspect of Fairweather’s long and twisting life. It is a projection of wanderlust taken to its ultimate conclusion.

![Fig. 44: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *After the Raft*. 2007, 700mm x 2000mm, acrylic on canvas and board, collection of the author.](image)

In a recent work, *After the Raft* (2007) shown above, I have tried to imagine the experience of looking down from that flimsy construction into the abyss below that he must have seen when floating on the Arafura Sea, wondering if he would live or not. The picture plane in this work is long, its height short; the length helps me to conceive the voyage (any voyage), as infinite in its allure. It is a space beyond boundaries just as Fairweather 389 certainly was.

In this trial by thirst, Fairweather did achieve something, a language for himself a distilled essence of travel as an act of self-revelation and an exploration of the very bedrocks of meaning. One only has to look at his work after the raft, to see what


389 Ibid.
has been left on the sea. Fairweather learnt to shed the baggage of his self, to become an artist-nomad of great insight. Fairweather gave these insights to us as teasing riddles, not to be explained through text and its relationship to meaning, a game, metaphor and labyrinth.

The path of Fairweather is a way with few signposts. The apparent freedom of movement and action of nomads has always been seen as a threat to settled states. The restrictions by regional governments placed upon the Orang Lau, to follow their chosen routes, is an example. When Emperor Chin She Huang combined various walls to build the Great Wall of China he did so with a clear purpose in mind, to stop the incursions of nomads, yet the wall’s purpose went deeper. The wall was there to keep the subjects of the emperor in as well. The bricks of the wall defined clearly, who was Chinese and who was not and therefore ‘other’.\(^\text{390}\) Denied knowledge of what was beyond the wall, the Chinese populace remained quiescent for long stretches, as taxpayers under the protection of the imperial government. Nomad mobility was an alternative too dangerous for the imperial rulers to contemplate letting their frequently restive subjects taste. My journeys, in contrast, seem much more prosaic; 747 jets appear far more prosaic than flimsy drop tanks and mangrove polls for masts.

A stripe, a gesture, a voyage, a raft casts off from a beach onto the sea – an over-romantic reading of prosaic acts? In creating paintings, I see departures and interior terrains, which may lead to memories I have not yet made. These paintings are a creation of experience, visual language and the random but rich fragments of memory coalescing in my inner terrain.

In his original formulation of causality, Aristotle had allowed for the existence of an amorphous potentia between the rush of cause and the stamp of effect. It was the interface between the two where something unexpected could take place. Bacon and Descartes clanged shut this gap in their deterministic logic. In the subsequent

formulation of the laws of causality, there was no room for anything to squeeze between an action and its result. Pollock, leaving a dangling moment, re-created that chink through which potentia reinserted itself.  

Leonard Shlain bases the argument of his book *Art and Physics* on the premise that the two disciplines share common intersections of chance, meaning and process, they are dismantling a priori knowledge which at one time or another underpinned the conceptualisation of reality in western cultures. The writer does not argue a conscious strategy, rather that the process of creativity inherent in art and physics creates moments of simultaneity in which one feeds on the processes of the other through symbiotic chance encounters.

The point the above quote makes is that in the Aristotelian ‘potentia’, re-imagined by Jackson Pollock, the creative potential of the chance encounters can shine through unfettered and liberated. To do this the traveller must also be unfettered and unarmoured, risking themselves as Fairweather and Colin McCahon did, to see and experience the possibilities of the ‘potentia’ as a creative space. The borderless space, the hyphenated space between centre-periphery, is the destination of the nomad-artist. This then becomes a liberated space, by denying the reading of encounters as a subject/object, either/or binary moment.

I am using this reading of ‘potentia’ to reinterpret the messages of my own travels. While undertaking the journey to the Australian interior for my project NEVER NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER NEVER I read an essay aptly entitled, ‘On the Dangers of Travel’ by Bernard Blistene. The essay warned of the dangers of seeking the exotic as a balm for one’s own emptiness and the grave danger of travelling with one’s eyes firmly on the destination (a conquistador’s path). Instead Blistene advised that we travel with our eyes open and not find ourselves, as he put it; …

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still shamelessly playing at explorers.\textsuperscript{394} Yet we can still be explorers, though in different terrains both external and internal. We cannot rely on old ways of seeing and a one-way gaze from thinking subject to passive object. As alluded to in \textit{Exploration of the Known Route}, the nomad-artist is alone but surrounded by crowds of travellers; a nomad even if unseen.

Painting is a waiting game; even as one applies the layers of paint and then scrapes them away one can be blind like King Oedipus. This work titled \textit{Blind Oedipus} explores one of the most tragic of narratives from Greek mythology; it was also one of the most difficult works I have attempted. One waits for the work to speak to you and reveal at a certain point, just what it is about, and this painting did not do so easily. Partly this was because my original concept for the painting failed completely soon after starting. I was left with a surface prepared for one idea, without a clue how to proceed. This work is made of pieces of old canvas glued over plywood and the frayed edges and folds of the surface are prominent. In addition I had cut out a slit-like recess in the surface intending to place objects in it. Now I had a near ruined object in front of me with elements that offered no hint of where to go. What to do? I started painting, experimenting with different approaches and always the slit split my efforts in two – one side would not talk to the other. My breakthrough came when the painting told me forcefully that the slit was not something to be filed, but a void and entrance into another place, like blind eyes. After that the work and its purpose became clear to me, it was a form of automatic writing over and over again with elements both appearing, amalgamating and disappearing, each contending with each other. I consider this work an arena of pain and revelation through a powerful ‘poieo’ based on the horror of self-mutilation, caused by the revealing of a truth of oneself so shocking as to demand such a sacrifice as sight, to truly ‘see’. Oedipus loses everything he holds dear, including his own self-worth; he wanders in a tragic journey searching for an answer to the pitiless cruelty of the gods. I doubt there is a more confronting tragedy, and ever since I heard the story it has fascinated me for this is a narrative

\textsuperscript{394}ibid., 54.
of looking steadily into the darkness in the very centre of the human condition, questioning the very nature of human existence.

Fig. 45: Mark Elliot-Ranken. Blind Oedipus. 2007, 700x2000mm, acrylic on canvas over board, possession of the author.

A powerful and tragic image, it implies to me that the fluidity of the experience of movement is behind one’s own eyes and there, exploration is not a game. It is the essence of the artist-nomad’s path and the bumpy corrugations of its progress are part of the creative act; after all, in such a space, the unexpected is the only state of being you can expect. Oedipus with his blinded eyes is left to navigate the labyrinth of his own life and actions, to a confrontation with self-knowledge at its end. It is only through the action of painting I can approach these dangerous spaces, and each mark-making moment has its own intense revelation to tell me. This is my language of creation.
Fig. 46: Mark Elliot-Ranken. *Dark Whispers*, 2009, 1800mm x 2500mm, acrylic on canvas, possession of the author.
NOMAD STRATEGIES: CONCLUSIONS

We don’t receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.395

Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust’s point, that only we can take our individual journey, is at the core of the condition of entering the space and experience that is the journey.396 This exegesis has been written around two threads: travel as an exploration of the relationship between the internal and external states of the traveller, and the position of the journey existing as a space unique to itself, using my own journeys to explore the latter proposition. The exegesis is very personal, autobiographical in several aspects with a methodological basis that is in part Autoethnographic.397 This is a tendency I have noted in several of the writers I have cited in this project. As Sarah Wells, writer and sociologist, noted in her abstract for her 2006 article on autoethnography, ‘The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for non-traditional forms of inquiry and expression.’398 It is near impossible to describe the experiences of travel, without coming to terms with the affects it is having on oneself as well as one’s audience, a blurring of the subject-object binary conceptualisation implied in much orthodox writing concerning the relationship of ‘other’ and ‘us’.

From Syed Manzurul Islam399 to Joseph Conrad,400 whether fiction or non-fiction, the experiences of being on the way, far from the familiar and in the presence of

396 Ibid.
398 ibid., 1.
399 Islam Syed Manzurul, The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka (UK: Manchester University Press, 1996).
those not normally found in your own community, is confronting, exciting, liberating and unnerving. Further, to be in the gaze of those whose home ground you are passing through and who may have very different priorities to you, challenges your own identity, your sense of self and the presumptions you may carry within. Unless you the traveller are prepared to challenge your own preconceptions of ‘them’ and ‘us’, to ‘become-other’ and undergo the transformative process of truly travelling, then the potential gift of liberation in the space of the journey, on the ‘Way’ cannot take place.

I have used two terms, ‘artist-nomad’ and ‘conquistador’ to describe two different ways of travelling and exploring the ramifications of travel for the artist. I have drawn especially on the work of Syed Manzurul Islam in *The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka*. I have proposed that the artist-nomad follows a path that acknowledges the need to examine internally, as well as externally, the experiences of interaction between the other and oneself, as equals. By contrast, the conquistador follows a trajectory that denies as much as possible, close contact with the ‘other’. Further, the conquistador rejects the validity of the returning of the gaze of ‘others’, enforcing a subject-object condition of rigidity and superiority.

For the artist-nomad the space of the journey is a nomadic home for the duration of their travel. It is the critical hyphen between centre-periphery relationships, a multi-facetted third space of fertile possibility. The conquistador’s approach to the space of the journey is the opposite. The space is an interlude between departure and return, preferably carrying with it the trophies of power and domination. Those who inhabit the space of the journey are merely background to the self-centred and rigid trajectory of the conquistador. Their views, thoughts and needs are unimportant to the armoured conquistador, returning uninfected from distant and exotic places.

In Chapter One I introduced the concept of ‘Nomad Strategy’ and explored my
own travels, as they have taught me to see with new eyes as a nomad-artist. I introduced my Artist journals as an aide-mémoire to explore my experiences, especially in Papua New Guinea where issues of relationship with the diverse inhabitants were at the forefront of my two years there. I particularly noted the importance by the subaltern writer Syed Manzurul Islam’s distinction between nomadic travel and sedentary travel, as the foundation for my approach to being an artist-nomad. This [artist-nomad] was defined as a nomadic traveller by embracing the act of change, ‘becoming-other’ as a liberating state of being.

Chapter Two concentrated on my own journeys through Australia as an artist-nomad, Ian Fairweather and the project participants from Singapore, whom I helped bring to the Northern Territory in 1997. The imperial exploration and occupation of Australia began and continued at the beginning of the industrial age and continues to the present period; I am only one of thousands who have ‘Explored the Known Route’ in many guises. These travellers over the thin grid of roads and tracks across Australia go for many reasons, from commercial travellers, to the ‘grey nomads’ retirees with their motorhomes and caravans. Each has placed themselves on a routing system around Australia that is surprisingly democratic as a mixing pot for highly diverse individuals. The journey, I have found, touches them all in some way, and these travellers will talk of their journeys around the campfires and bars of all the stopping points they rest at. In their own way they have entered a different space of contact, relationship and experiences they otherwise would not have had except for being on the road between departure and destinations.

In Chapter Three I discussed the concepts of ‘them’ and ‘us’ and the ‘other’. I argued that the rigidity of these bounded relationships breaks down rapidly, with close contact between the inhabitants of the spaces that an artist-nomad passes

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403 Mark Elliot-Ranken, Exploration of the Known Route (Catalogue Essay for the collaborative project NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER, Australia, 1993-1994).
through, but only with the shedding of a conquistador’s armour of prejudice and fear of contamination. I emphasised the need to develop an internal language to examine and question one’s own subconscious baggage, if one is to liberate oneself from the conquistador’s condition of self-imposed rigidity.

I drew on my own journeys, recorded in text and illustration in my Artist journals, especially my encounter with a Tana Toragan carver from the island of Sulewasi in Indonesia. The carver, whose name I no longer recall, could not speak English, nor could I speak Toragan or Bahasa Indonesia enough to communicate. Yet through the power of his carving and other means of exchange and reciprocity, we made a connection. I was the privileged party and the impact of that meeting which was to open my eyes fully to the context I had placed myself, leads to the tentative formulation of the nomad strategy I was to employ subsequently with various success in my later journeys.

Chapter Four, Tourist v Artist-Nomad, explored the many threads that entwine to make a journey an interaction of relationships as well as a physical experience. I have taken the position that no artist-nomad can afford to impose neo-imperialist monologues onto the encounters with the owners of the space that they travel through. This meeting of yourself and the other is the true third space proposed by Edward Soja, a space that can allow the process of ‘becoming-other’ envisaged by Syed Manzurul Islam to begin. I have referred especially to my own journeys to Africa in 1993 and China in 1998. In Africa I travelled alone, and this journey was a frequently difficult but invaluable experience as I have outlined. By contrast, my journey to China was in the company of Singaporean artists to the province of Yunnan. This journey was equally important but very different from Africa; the company of expatriate Chinese returning to their cultural roots made it easier to

both travel and interact with local inhabitants. However one had to be aware that one could not see through their eyes; to truly ‘see’ one had to still attempt to move with some independence.

Chapters Five and Six concentrate on the artists, as artist-nomads. I discussed the work of several artists such as Ian Fairweather, Michael Stevenson, Joe Furlonger, Jun Chen, Claire Healy and Sean Cordiero and myself as they/I developed bodies of work drawn from experiences of travel. I concentrated on aspects of Fairweather’s Raft voyage of 1952 and his later settlement on Bribie Island, as well as Furlonger’s and Chen’s joint journey through China and Stevenson’s interpretation of the raft through several reconstructions and associated activities. I also asked if the residencies and journeys of Healy and Cordiero constitute a ‘nomadic experience’ or are they denied this through the residencies definition as a fixed ‘place’, not a space in motion.

My title ‘Nomad Strategies: Artists’ Travel and Personal Transformation’, suggests that the decision to travel by the traveller places the individual in an ongoing space of movement, the journey. It is this decision that creates the opportunity for transformation. The recognition of this opportunity is the nomad strategy, for it recognises that the space of transformation is a momentary one, a state of ‘being there’ constantly changing, challenging borders. This is an important realisation; the space of transformation exists on no map and cannot be owned, just occupied for the time of its existence that is a short-term phenomenon. It is not the setting of boundaries that creates the space of liberation; it is the activity of creation, which defines the nature of the subtle ellipse of this liberated space between borders.

The work *Encounter II* (fig. 61) that I created in 2009 is an example of my exploration through the highly personal, visual language of painting, the Taoist concept of the ‘Way’ as a fluid and ambiguous space.408 This is a painting that invites you into the subtle nature of this exploration, as an active participant not a

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detached viewer. The rich colour and sensual surface of the work, enhances this invitation to enter into the space and it is a ‘space’, however two-dimensional the surface may actually be. It is as I said an ambiguous space, one constantly moving, shifting with the play of light, and the slight movement of the eyes as they flow across *Encounter II*. Movement is the key; do not attempt to rest on any one part of the surface, the work invites you deeper and deeper into its space, denying stasis while providing a flow into new and undefined spaces for the senses.

![Image of Encounter II by Mark Elliot-Ranke](image-url)

Fig. 47: Mark Elliot-Ranke. *Encounter II*. 2009, 1500mm x 1500mm, acrylic on canvas, possession of the author.

The Artist journal does not simply illustrate a journey, by recording, remembering and exploring the internal language created on the way the experience of the liberated space becomes an action, to go into the journey. Nostalgia is not an option; you can remember but not revisit what you have experienced; unless you are contemplating never looking for the creative phenomena and liberating moment of self-transformation again. It is always a space that is coming into being and, as Heraclitus said, ‘you cannot step into the same river twice’; the next time will be
its own experience. The space created by Fairweather on the raft was such a space: it is unrepeatable, unique and inspiring but it is not a space anyone else would or should want to recreate. The momentary nature of this floating site belongs entirely to Fairweather; he did it, he took the irrevocable step of casting off and heading out into the fluid void of the journey. We can only be moved vicariously but cannot be in that space with him; the raft is still in perpetual motion in a space of his liberation that he earned through imagining the act and then acting on the thought. We will need to recognise our own unique opportunity when it comes to us as a gift of travel.

**Future directions**

As stated, I have used the last two chapters of the exegesis to concentrate on artists-nomads. As I have progressed with this exegesis my interest has grown in several areas, notably the development of the internal language of artists to attempt to build bridges between individuals and cultures that may not share common roots. Today this is happening with increasing frequency, for me as recently as this year. Between the 1 and 2 June I, with several other PhD candidates from University of Newcastle’s School of Drama, Fine Arts and Music, attended a seminar held at the Queensland College of the Arts, Griffith University in Brisbane. I read my own seminar paper entitled ‘The Studio as a Shared Space’ in conjunction with John Barnes, with whom I share my current studio on campus. After the formal papers were read I mingled with the other PhD candidates as we shared informal experiences of study, institutions and plans. Through such informal chance encounters I have now established a tentative network for collaboration especially with Brisbane based artist/researcher Peter Fenoglio, that I hope to expand using the Internet, visits and other forms of communication to develop new bodies of work. It is an exciting possibility and would not have happened except through travel. Artists are now constantly on the move and can

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409 Heraclitus of Ephesus: circa 500 BCE.
be found far from home. In the arts and film magazine *Real Time* of 2009, an especially interesting series of articles appeared from the writers, Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter who attended the two-day forum ‘New Spaces and Systems for the Arts, Creating Connections-Connecting Creativity’. The event, organised by ‘Berlin Contemporary Artsspace Radial system V’, focused on the renewal through the arts, of urban spaces, notably in this case Berlin, an exciting but chronically broke city of great dynamism.\(^{410}\) The article clearly shows the tensions that exist between semi-publicly funded art-spaces that need to operate as both artistic hubs, community centres and commercial entities frequently established to reinvigorate older suburbs in the city that no longer fulfil their original industrial purpose. While intriguing in itself, the focus of the forum is beyond this exegesis; my interest lies in the accompanying article by the same two authors on the dynamic and transient nature of the Berlin Arts Community titled ‘Berlin: Island & Identity’. As the two writers observe:

> The artists we met, not a few of them Australian, live in Berlin because of its cultural density which offers them connections, networks, study, mentoring, collaborations, inspiration and cheap rent, but not necessarily work or grants. Some arrive with grants from their home countries, many work elsewhere in Europe and use Berlin as a home.\(^{411}\)

Berlin is not the only artistic hub drawing artists; cities have always historically acted as magnets for creative and ambitious practitioners. The point that these writers make is the inter-connectedness of artists and their practices as part of networks in a number of sites, living in Berlin but working elsewhere while coming from such places as Australia. Such artists, I suggest, use forms of nomad strategies developed to suit their individual needs in this moment ‘being there’, to


produce spaces of creativity based on mobility, flexibility, short-lived encounters with frequently long-term ramifications and excitement of being in situations of their own making a liberating moment if seized and acted upon.

This is a path based on individual connections, for as the writer and traveller Nicholas Jose says, cultures do not fit easily together but messages of communication, inquiry and interest are constantly being sent out. Jose identifies artists as prime candidates for picking up these messages in the ether by their attuned senses for the unusual, unconventional and plain odd. Artists also frequently work in ways that demand a one-on-one relationship with other artists from other cultures. Such a situation cannot happen when any think themselves superior because of ethnicity, economics or perceived cultural superiority. My own practice and internal language as a visual artist has changed rapidly during this investigation as well as my own journeys, as the journals and recent works document. Travel in this regard is a very personal experience, only accomplished by you as an artist-nomad. It is as a traveller that one has the opportunity to create the third space of transformative possibility; ‘becoming-other’ is a moment of shedding the past, where the language of creativity becomes the poetry of struggle and the very voice of your own personal liberation. This creative space is ephemeral, a short-lived phenomenon that is constantly in a condition of becoming. It is also a performative space that operates as one works and travels, one’s personal language of exploration evolves.

As I look at my own paintings, drawings and installation pieces I am highly aware of the changes that have happened. Gone in the paintings is any attempt to evoke the figurative echoes of external existence; the work no longer has found objects incorporated in the surfaces though such signifiers are apparent in the 3D wall and floor pieces such as Pulse (Fig. 48). Now the paintings concentrate on one question: what does painting signify to me? My answer, that it is a transformational act that creates its own meaning and that act is the gate to the space of liberation. That

transformative action is evidenced as a performative adaptation towards a reductive stylistic position in painting. This reductive, minimalist agency of expression is used to evoke the transformative space of the journey articulated through the written thesis. This represents the praxis of the theory and practice embodying my philosophical position and my contribution to new knowledge. In order to understand the praxis of travel one would seem to need to use images of ones travels such as those gathered in my journals, however what I in fact experience is the ‘space of travel’, that is mobility rather than stasis. To approach this understanding one needs to paint the space of travel and for this a different, non-figurative, reductive language of painting is needed.

In *Pulse* enigma builds on ambiguity: is the work a painting, a wall piece or a painted sculpture; what constitutes the work, nine painted rectangles, or should the space between them be read into the whole work? I can answer the latter question: the space between is part of the work and as I intended it to be read by the viewer. In my reading of *Pulse* the work should be read as a whole. It is about surface and space; the negative spaces between are as vital to the whole, as the positive surfaces of the individual parts. Whether it is a ‘painting’ or not I do not think is really important, the point is how the viewer reads it as a whole positive and negative space included. The work in this regard has a quality of movement inherent to its existence, the play of light slowly changes as the day progresses even under the artificial light of the gallery, gradually changing the relationship between the voids separating the positive forms and therefore the very nature of the work itself. This is the evolving language of my experience in the space of travel. A transformative process always coming into being, as an exploration of the uncharted internal territory revealed to me within the space of the journey.
For this artist-nomad then, liberation is offered every time I enter the creative moment of picking up a brush and putting the coloured muds on a piece of canvas. A gate opens, even if only momentarily, to another space of possibility and my works are spaces as much as surfaces. From this act all else flows and it is truly, a gift of travel that, as Proust said: ‘… No one can take for us or spare us’\textsuperscript{413}

\textsuperscript{413}“Marcel Proust,” \texttt{www.quotationspage.com} (accessed August 14, 2009).
Fig. 49: Smiff Puppets, an interior view of the Gypsy van of ‘Smiff Travelling Puppet Show’, showing the tiny interior that was home to a family of three, May 15, 2010. Photograph Bernadette Smith.
APPENDIX ONE: M. K. Elliot-Ranken Catalogue Essay

The catalogue essay ‘Exploration of the Known Route’ I wrote for the NEVER NEVER, NEVER NEVER collaborative project with Cath Bowdler in 1993 relates to the impressions of a journey from Darwin to Alice Springs and return undertaken in 1992. I undertook this journey with a friend to follow the Stuart Highway through the many changes of climate and communities in the Northern Territory. Along the way we discovered a surprisingly busy tar strip full of travellers of all persuasions. These other travellers made the route we took both familiar yet new, as each person and each incident of the journey put the experience of travelling in a different perspective.

The time and progress of the journey were layered with new encounters each day, and as the face of the country changed so did the inhabitants of this strange land. The essay below attempted to come to terms with the encounter of these people and with the road, a single line of tar from Darwin to Adelaide and a progression of hellos and goodbyes.

**Exploration of the Known Route**

**EXPLORE:** To search through with the view of making discovery; to leave the beaten tracks; to investigate; to examine.

**KNOWN:** To be aware of; to have information about; to have fixed in the mind; to recognise.

**ROUTE:** A course or way which is to be travelled or followed.

A dichotomy, this trip of ten days, exploring where a great many have gone before. They have left substantial ghosts and flimsy realities along the way.

Wells and water, clues to an inland sea present but not seen, a dream, a
compulsion, a destination never reached but dug for. History reveals a British naval captain instructed to find it (the inland sea), having to admit after running wildly through the bush, that he was to be denied. (Stokes 1836)

Boreholes, well springs and dried creeks. The towns along the known route, (the Stuart Highway) are dependent on these, they drain the life from them. Alice Springs’ drinkable water comes from a bore field a hundred miles to the west and has a use-by date, yet 50 000 people are expected to live there in someone’s future.

In the north the water flows freely, it’s all over the place after the wet. Emerald Springs really is “emerald” in colour, and Mataranka … the water is crystal and blue, warm and constrained for tourists, never have I seen so many signs of what not to do!

Windmills, some broken, some turning, stand beside tanks with often smelly mineralised water, too salty to drink, drawn from below. Ryan spent five years building wells, truncated stone pyramids animal powered with long troughs for cattle, lined with wood.

Yamaha pumps under tripods of metal legs stand beside older incisions now disused. The water table falls and water is a commodity, needing to be mined; they charge you for excess in the centre.

Across, around and down the tar ribbon go tourists, trucks, myself, families, travellers migrating and nomads in Bedford vans. Cultures, uprooted and home-grown, flow, jostle, collide and rub together like tectonic plates in the earth we stand on, an uncertain crust a mobile and restless skin. As an artist, as a person, where do I belong?

This place is no longer an accident of history but a history of accidents that have happened, a series of ill-fitting fragments which rub and create, what …
Water is the key – an inland sea is a known thing if you look for it. The known is always a surprise package of unknowns.
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