‘At home in Gippsland’: a place-making activity

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Introduction

At Home in Gippsland is one strand of a project investigating some of the ways in which femininity is constituted and has been constituted, in the spatial context of Gippsland, Victoria. In a series of Workshops I encouraged women to tell stories that revealed their connections to place and the effect of dominant storylines evident in the spatial context of Gippsland. Johnson explains that ‘geographic space has come to be seen not as a neutral container of social and bio-physical relations but as a medium which registers and expresses power and sexual difference’ (2000: 2). This paper discusses the methodology that facilitated the story telling and place-making. The place-conscious methodology offers an approach to community practices that are sustainable in that it is responsive to the local community and able to be adapted to meet changing needs.

Gippsland is a large regional area in the southeast of the state adjacent to the metropolitan sprawl of Melbourne. It is known to be productively diverse with an economic base in dairy, logging, tourism, gourmet food and wine, and most significantly the generation of 85% of the state’s electricity. This diversity reflects the variations in the physical environment with massive tracts of wilderness and farmland, plantation forests and an extensive ocean frontage. Non-indigenous people’s association with, and use of the land has been somewhat vexed since colonisation due initially to impenetrable terrains, early conflict with the Indigenous people, and flood, fire and drought. Masculinist narratives of the heroic settler or immigrant have historically represented this complexity, but in recent decades storylines of loss and depression associated with deindustrialisation have created a bleak outlook compounding lower than average standards of living, income and educational attainment. However, some parts of the region are tourist destinations, the alpine district and seaside for example and there is a growing food and wine trail. Gippsland is represented by a paradoxical mix of fecundity and lack, reminiscent of traditional views of the feminine and a disconnect between people and nature that is widely associated with economic rationalism and environmental exploitation (Plumwood, 2003:52).
Local communities in Gippsland face conundrums emanating from the depressed socio-economic base and generational unemployment. Gambling and violence for example are significant local problems, while the high demand for water by industry and the need for environmental solutions like clean coal technology keep global issues on local horizons. The current situation presents complex challenges that necessitate widespread community engagement. However, engaging communities in new ways of thinking about social and environmental issues is itself a significant challenge, particularly when popular culture is persuasive source of information for adults driven by the economics of consumer culture (Guy, 2007: 16). In a special edition of New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education, the Editors suggested that the complexity of environmental problems for example, can be difficult to grasp and be a barrier to people envisioning how they can ‘make a difference, thereby engendering feelings of hopelessness, fear, confusion and apathy’ (Hill and Clover, 2003: 1). As well, Cameron points out that there is a widening gap in Western countries between mobile global citizens and those on the margins, particularly in terms of their capacity to address that gap (2003: 180). This presents community educators with a particular challenge to devise programmes and develop practices that are sustainable over time.

The development of place-consciousness or a place-responsive culture is increasingly seen as a necessary step towards sustainable societies (Cameron, 2003: 194). Cameron (2003) and Plumwood (in Cameron, 2003) respectively say this involves radical or revolutionary change. Some educators have turned to the physical spaces of inhabitation as sites of learning to address these challenges because place-conscious education acknowledges that learning occurs through lived experience in specific contexts, through interdependence of individuals and the places they inhabit (Somerville, 2008; Gruenewald, 2003). Place enlivens the notion of context because it draws on the interrelationship of the social and physical landscapes as a dynamic interaction, and as Somerville explains ‘creates a space between grounded physical reality and the metaphysical space of representation’ (2007: 2). Somerville (2008) has recently conceptualised a framework to research the pedagogies of place. There are three key principles in Somerville’s place pedagogy framework: our relationship to place is constituted in stories and other representations, the body is at the centre of our experience of place; and place is a contact zone of cultural difference where diverse experiences meet.

The Story Workshops discussed in this paper draw on Somerville’s three principles and Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of the experience of place as socially constructed through cultural practice, imaginings and representation (Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine, 2004: 5). This discussion will demonstrate that place as a framework is a useful pedagogical approach to facilitate informal learning. Beginning with the rationale and description of the Workshops, the discussion relates the Workshops to dominant storylines of Gippsland evident in cultural practices, imaginings and representations, introducing the concept of
the contact zone as facilitating the exploration of difference. With examples from *Peripheral Vision: a kaleidoscope of stories of Gippsland by women*, a small book produced by the group as an outcome of the Workshops the paper explains how the activity moved the storytelling beyond dominant storylines of heroism or dysfunction in Gippsland. The Workshops also revealed a perspective of place that reflects Paul Carter’s idea of ‘*Care at a distance: affiliations to country in a global context*’ (2008), a reflexivity needed to reimagine and enable sustainable futures. In this regard, the Workshops were a valuable place-making activity that fostered place-consciousness and built confidence in reflexive awareness of personal experience.

**Background to ‘At Home in Gippsland’**

As a newcomer to Gippsland in 2006, I enjoyed the friendliness of local people in the small town where I lived, and I observed the intense loyalty often voiced for *their place*. I devised the project, ‘*At Home in Gippsland*’, Story Workshops for Women because I wanted to tap into the attachment and goodwill I encountered as a pathway to hearing women’s experiences of living in this diverse rural region of Victoria. I wondered how women storied their experiences in the face of dominant historical representations that constructed and upheld stereotypical views of heterosexual femininity inherent in public storylines of heroic masculinity.

**Neighbourhood Houses**

The Workshops were held in a local Neighbourhood Centre and although they were the central means of data collection for the research, the programme I implemented was designed as a pleasurable activity rather than specifically investigative or educational. I had previously successfully conducted a similar programme for research purposes in a community centre, and I am also aware that adult and community centres are always on the lookout for new activities and programmes to widen their services and appeal, and to diversify their client base.

A thriving network of community centres has existed in Gippsland for over twenty years, providing adult learning opportunities and social support. Neighbourhood Houses or Centres as they are variously known, are metaphorically conceived as the heart of the community, an idea that is often represented in posters, quilts and other representations. The Houses are also important stop gaps that address social deficits and specific shortfalls in service provisions such as occasional care for children, literacy education and life skills. Like adult and community centres elsewhere, Neighbourhood Houses in Gippsland aim to respond to local needs. The services and courses on offer change to meet perceived community needs. For example, the privatisation of the power industry in Gippsland in 1990s presented local neighbourhood centres with unfamiliar challenges to meet the sudden influx of clients with new needs for retraining and skills like computing, and resume writing. However, vocational programmes were not the only needs that presented. Many Houses experienced a substantial increase in social and welfare needs that has continued to grow. The Houses thus play an important community service as a hub in social service networks.
As well as being promoted through the Neighbourhood House Programme, the Workshops were also advertised in regional newspapers and I was subsequently invited to speak about the project on ABC Radio Gippsland. This triple pronged approach to advertising the Workshops resulted in wide interest in the project and participation by a diverse group of women participants and located the project in community.

**The Story workshops**

**Rationale**

*At Home in Gippsland Story Workshops* took the popularity of family albums, scrapbooks, and genealogical research as a point of departure. These pleasurable pastimes are generally individual activities and modes of authorization (Gudmundsdottir, 2006: 220), however using collaborative processes of storytelling decentres the authorial subject and facilitates embodied remembering of diverse experiences. Women often do not think of their own life experiences as valuable or note worthy and pursue the essentially archival activities listed above, for the sake of others or to keep someone else’s stories. In a previous project with women the participants did not think they even had a story worthy of telling until they were able to position a personal experience in the heroic narrative form. The experiences available to them that complied with this form were stories of overcoming odds, predominately trauma such as surviving abuse, teenage pregnancy and adoption. The heroic story form provided the women a legitimated speaking position they took up to talk about their lives, but their reliance on this form gave little scope to talk about other experiences. Their story telling, even unconsciously, was underpinned by an understanding that a proper story is a quest narrative.

Purposeful strategies are needed to open up memory of embodied experiences beyond quest or heroic storylines. The activities I used in the Workshops for this purpose are derived from collective biography (de Carteret et al 2008; Onyx & Small, 2007; Davies & Gannon, 2006) which very briefly, is a group process of memory work and story telling. It involves prompting memories with a question or topic related to the project, telling the first memory or response that comes to mind, listening to each other’s stories then asking for clarification of the story. Participants may then write their story and read the completed story to the group. The iterative process develops reflexive awareness to critically expand on the memory. Through questions and discussion dominant storylines, or resonant threads and responses can be identified, teased out or interrogated. Collective biography is:

> an ethical reflexivity that enables us not simply to reiterate habituated knowledges, but to see, feel, touch and hear, our own and others’ vulnerability to those normative discourses and practices.

*(Davies and Gannon, 2006: 182)*

I chose an image of the Big Cigar (see photo below) at Churchill for the flyer advertising the workshops, and introduced the idea of ‘At home in Gippsland’ to invoke a sense of belonging focussed on place. The monument pays tribute to Sir Winston Churchill and presides over the shopping precinct in the township of Churchill named after him amid local controversy. The anticipated prosperity of the town constructed after the war did not
reach the hoped for proportions and the Big Cigar, locally dubbed the pigeon roaster, is an incongruous place marker and memorial in this district known for greenhouse emissions. In my eyes, the big cigar memorialises a sense of paradox that framed the Workshops with intersecting storylines individuals might interpret in their own way.

Outline of Workshops
Initially I facilitated a series of 5 workshops – an introductory session to explain the research and the project, followed by 4 fortnightly morning workshops that were digitally recorded and transcribed. In the end a core group of seven participants continued meeting for several months beyond 5 sessions to produce Peripheral Vision, an edited book of the stories. A year later, with extra funding, we continue working together to transfer the stories and images to a DVD Talking Book.

The Workshops were structured around the methods of collective biography. There are four phases of collective biography in the method Bronwyn Davies has developed from Frigga Haug’s (1992) method of memory work, however I implement the phases loosely in the Story Workshops. The first phase of collective biography dubbed talking story by Onyx and Small (2001), is pivotal to my approach that focuses substantially on story telling rather than writing. While I modified the subsequent phases - questioning and refining; writing; and analysis; the Workshops nevertheless follow the process that retrieves embodied stories.

Each Workshop session began with a memory exercise. Simple prompts like photographs, garden cuttings, or a topic I had chosen were introduced to the group who were invited to individually tell the group their first response to the prompt. Whereas Haug’s memory work begins with writing the initial memory, I found in previous life
story work with women that the first phase of informal telling was crucial to building women’s confidence in the worth of their stories and embodied memories. One of the participants metaphorically expressed the importance of embodied memory when she said: *If you remember it, it’s still there, it’s just in another room.* Understood this way memory lodged in the body as an aspect of subjectivity.

Over the series, stories and conversations ranged broadly, touching layers of experiences of Gippsland, love of the local environment and special places, impermanence due to living in temporary accommodation, expansion of the mines and destruction of home, moving houses, coping with family secrets, social problems, connections among women, mothers work, and social change.

**Talking Story**
The session topics were intended to stimulate a range of individual responses and conversations by allowing participants scope to interpret the issues broadly. For example, the suggestion, *tell me about a place that is special to you in Gippsland,* produced responses as varied as a description of a geographic vista, memories of holidays, a walk around a home garden, and walking with a grandmother in her garden in Ireland. The memory work moved by association through time and places, and though the women were surprised and even apologetic when the stories escaped the parameters of Gippsland, I reminded them that the experience of one place often brings a rush of memory from another. Although I avoided imposing particular expectations, I am aware that research is by nature ‘expectant’. Even with my reassurance, the participants’ perception that only Gippsland stories were of interest to the study was also a reminder that in spite of the pleasure of working together, our interactions are underpinned by different roles and a variety of motives. However, it was also clear that the participants interpreted the focus on Gippsland as a means to generate public history, and initially they vetted their own experiences by that measure.

However, the ease of the small group and the techniques of memory work encouraged the conversations to take flight from the initial topic and the ensuing stories would develop or trail off into new areas as other women picked up a thread:

> *What I love best about these group discussions is when you just let things wander where it takes you, and if you aren’t fearful, well it just takes you into new territory and you remember, all of a sudden you’re there, in it, and its wonderful.* (Jan, 2007)

Women took the lead from each other as in the following conversation among three women who touched on painful and secret memories:

> *Women feel a responsibility when we have a family. You keep secrets in the family, but the family next door could be going through the same thing.*  
> *My dad had terrible problems after he came back from the war … he wouldn’t wash, he wouldn’t talk to anyone, he just sat there.*  
> *My dad had war problems too, from being gassed.*  
> *Secrets, the moment you say it, it stops being powerful.* (Jan, Dee and Bonnie, 2007)
The discussion then fanned out to post traumatic stress, the important role of counselling, repercussions on families, alcoholism and the problem of gambling in the local region.

The nature of progress and change often came up in nostalgic reflections that developed into reflexive discussions, as happened with the following story about the Traralgon Hospital that encapsulates the poignancy that led to stimulating conversations:

_"I can remember we used to pick mushrooms on the old Traralgon Hospital site – that was one of our out of town mushroom paddocks. We used to pick mushrooms there and then it was built .... Then many years later they pulled it down. No one would imagine with our beautiful pride we had in our hospital, it just wouldn’t exist anymore."_ (Jan, 2007)

Others responded to this with their own stories of community disappointment when the Traralgon Hospital was closed, the political climate at the time and a sense of wasted resources. The conversation revealed commitment and pride in community achievements such as fundraising to build a kindergarten and to buy equipment for the hospital. The stories swept back to the reason many of their families had moved to the district for work on civil projects and the women’s regret for the demise of facilities and services the community had worked hard to achieve. The conversations also ventured into the future, expressing a willingness tinged with uncertainty about where the present was going and how they could contribute. The to-ing and fro-ing across time and distance reminded me of Carter’s view of the epistemological significance of allowing the emotional domain, wherever its origins, to inform the future (2008: 1).

The women’s stories and discussions veered into the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of their lives, ‘a felt sense of place and the intuitive and imaginative sensing that is active when one is attuned to, and receptive towards, one’s surroundings’ (Cameron, 2003: 173). After one Workshop Kaye wrote a poem at home and brought it in the next week to share. The excerpt shows that she feels a sense of self as interconnected with Gippsland:

_Gippsland is the place I live_  
The place of my birth  
The place of my connection  
To this very earth

_So when I go away from here,_  
_I take the essence of the Valley with me,_  
_part of the Gipps Lands,_  
_the part that I call me_  

(Kaye, 2007)

These two stanzas also reveal an interesting juxtaposition in the poem between Gippsland as it is now known, and the Gipps Lands of the nineteenth century. In this differentiation Kaye acknowledges the significance of naming and she alludes to her belonging in the region in the time frame marked by colonisation when Gipps explored and mapped the area. Indirectly Kaye draws attention to Indigenous connection to the land, a topic that was broached in one Workshop conversation cautiously. The women expressed concern for local Aboriginal people dispossessed of their own country and the conflicts that
decimated the early Indigenous population. The talk touched on feelings of inadequacy in knowing how or where to make contact with people from different cultural backgrounds who live in their towns at the same time as they shared information and experiences they had acquired.

The women discussed and even debated their thoughts and concerns in the Workshops. There was some disagreement, but respectful listening to different views always preceded discussion such as about spirituality and progress. The women drew on their own experiences. One woman attributed her love of the quarter acre block in Australia to growing up in the crowded tenements of Scotland. For Bonnie, the bounded open space of the Australian backyard provided a healthy, safe environment she valued. While Dee regretted the invasion of suburbia into the pastoral lands of her childhood. She had seen the landscape of the family property reconstructed, the swamps on the family farm drained, rubbish and rubble dumped as fill, and watched a carpet of modernity erase the fertile pastoral environment.

Talking story produced rich and telling conversations which actually involved what would normally be organised as separate phases of collective biography and memory work because they involved ‘collective analysis … to uncover the common social understanding of each event, the social meanings embodied in the actions described … and how these meanings are arrived’ (Onyx and Small, 2001: 777).

**Refining and analysing stories**

Each week I would bring the transcript of the previous session to the Workshop. The sessions were then divided between memory work and collective biography, a morning tea break, and working with the transcript from the previous week. Eventually I cut and pasted excerpts of conversations from the transcripts into new word documents and gradually we arranged the stories in themes. We continued to work with the edited document, deciding on sections and headings in the book. The women also brought in stories and poems they had written at home in response to the Workshops and other items including photos and recipes related to the Workshops. In this way *Peripheral Vision* was created in the manner of a kaleidoscope from fragments of conversations and snippets of lived experience. Even the choice of words such as ‘kaleidoscope’ and ‘snippets’ began discussions that critically explored the purposes and parameters of our work together, the language and representation of lived experience in words. More often than not, the women initiated these discussions as they grappled in a pleasurable and interested way, to make sense of the different experiences expressed in the stories.

*Peripheral Vision* does not tell definitive stories. It presents perspectives that are peripheral to storylines commonly associated with Gippsland. The stories are bound more by the covers of the book than a dominant voice of authority. The participants discussed whether or not they would identify their words individually in *Peripheral Vision* but they decided that the texts were predominately produced collaboratively and with one or two named exceptions, ‘the writers … constructed a ‘we’ who speaks – more or less – for them all through the pages of the book’ (Davies and Gannon, 2006: 14).
Cultural practices of representation – self and/in place

Storying self

Even though all the participants had interaction with families and friends, they commented on occasion that it was unusual to discuss issues and instead they usually mulled over such things in private. Jan shouldered the feeling that she had to comply with cultural practices and expectations to be accepted in her community, and this left her feeling alone and misrecognised:

_I am interesting woman and no one knows it. I look like an ordinary grandmother, but its like standing on an island when you live all your life in a small community. You sort of put on a coat of ‘this is who I am’ and its so difficult sometimes, to stand alone in a community where its your home, its your base.’_ (Jan, 2007)

In this instance, Jan interprets her compliance at the expense of individuality as necessary to belonging. Her words suggest she feels constrained by stereotypical expectations of elderly women that inhibit expressing her desires and self knowledge from seventy years of life.

Identifying a coherent narrative of self is an important aspect of western cultural practices. Danielle Klapproth (2004: 56) for example, explains that ‘a persons sense of their social acceptance … is perceived in terms of a need for compliance with culturally recognized story types’. John Paul Eakin (1999:141) writes similarly about the importance of achieving a coherent personal narrative, pointing out that narrative practices are often used to gauge familiar signs of healthy identity.

The individual work to translate sociocultural expectations and negotiate disparities in personal experiences is therefore not a trivial matter. It is derived from knowing what constitutes culturally appropriate narratives, an awareness that is developed from an early age (Nelson 2003; Eakin 1999; Davies 1989). Davies explains that knowing what is ‘right’ is a consequence of ‘desires … constituted through the narratives and storylines, the metaphors, the very language and patterns of existence through which we are “interpellated” into the social world (2000: 37).’ Atkinson and Silverman point out that what is considered uniquely biographical ‘is always narrated in ways that establish and recapitulate cultural frames of reference (2006: 14). Cultural competence (Sondergaard, 2002: 199) necessarily inflects how individuals decide what is appropriate to tell about their lives. Indeed, tensions and differences created by competing storylines, and the necessity to reconcile them are embodied in response to cultural practices that interlock and buttress the whole of society (Haug 1992:49).

It is partly because a sense of self is tied to cultural competence with origins in hegemonic dualisms relating to gender and nature/culture (Plumwood, 2003: 54) that I chose not to specifically name the storylines I perceived as dominant in Gippsland as prompts in the Workshops. It was not my intention to challenge the women or for the Workshops to be a feminist consciousness raising exercise. And of course, images of industry or its effects are clearly visible at almost every turn in the Latrobe Valley while...
monumental structures like the Big Cigar and the Immigration Park memorialise particular central stories. The storylines and historical representations did figure in the conversations raised by the participants or reached through the processes of collective biography.

**Storying immigration**
An Immigration Park was opened during the period of the Workshops with considerable local media coverage that stimulated the women’s interest. The Park memorialises the heroism of early settlers and later migrants but the imagery of the lone male immigrant arriving with just one suitcase elides women and families. Several women talked about their experiences of migrating to Australia as young children, another remembered the anguish of grandparents who left two children behind with their extended family. Even though plaques surrounding the lone male statue feature the many nationalities that migrated and the wealth of cultural difference, yet women and child migrants are barely represented even here. The memorial institutes an insider/outsider dialectic regarding migration, an approach to place-making that Carter suggests creates an unproductive conflict, a hindrance to ‘care at a distance’ and to the possibility of designing the future in recollection of the past (2008: 1).

**Storying environment as economic utility**
A view of the landscape as a resource to be manipulated and exploited for consumption and economic imperatives underlines Gippsland with storylines of progress, expansion, and renewal. The region is inscribed with a responsibility to provide services and resources for the entire state. The landscape is constantly altered for mining and agricultural purposes. Plantations of fast yield timber are in stages of continual flux altering the visual shape of the terrain:

> When we were young, you would go up to Bulga Park and of course, its volcanic … and you’d look down and it would just be rolling, rolling hills. But when I went up a few
weeks ago … its rolling hills of plantation trees and forests. And where they’ve been cut down, they’re just all left dead. (Jan, 2007)

Jan’s story tells of ongoing changes. It suggests the settlers destruction of the forests to create pasture, and the destruction of the pasture for plantation timber.

Property is acquired and indeed the whole communities of Yallourn and Driffield have been moved to extend the open cut mines. Geographical features such as the Morwell River and constructions including the Strezlecki Highway have been relocated. An entire new town was built at Churchill in the 1960s, and new Morwell wetlands established. The women described the Valley viewed by the city that relies on its resources, as without care, ‘ a big black hole, a dirty big black hole’ (Bonnie, 2007). Kaye described Gippsland as ‘the other’ to Melbourne (2007) while Jan, commented with slippery meaning that ‘the energy of the Valley is the energy of the whole state’ (2007).

Dominant narratives inscribed on the landscape are like personal stories, cultural products that can elide histories and render silent ambiguous and contentious stories.

**Peripheral Vision**

One transcript reveals that I talked about different stories mapped in layers onto places by different needs and story tellers. Kaye took up this idea and the next week brought in a tourist map that she had literally cut up and pasted different pictures onto various places. She cut out a caption and pasted it on the map as a heading, ‘Inspired by Gippsland’. She explained that she had ‘found’ herself doing this as she thought about the Workshops and it was Kaye who was creatively inspired subsequently to write the poem, *A woman of the Gipps Lands.*

Lucy Lippard speaks of place within the map of person’s life as:

>a layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened here, what will happen here’. (1997:7)
Memory work peels through the layered map and in the process it opens up the interconnections of people and place. *Telling* is a space between the experience and representation in written words or other creative means. Pasting fragments of conversations together to make stories for the book kept the flow between different voices, decentering the authorial subject and maintaining diversity.

The women’s stories criss-cross between the present, the past and imaginings of the future. For instance, Bonnie’s story about a Scottish Festival at Glenmaggie in Northern Gippsland, her recipe for tattie scones, and her whimsical suggestion that Nessie, the Loch Ness Monster has taken up residence in Lake Glenmaggie, reinscribe connection with her distant home and childhood. Carter refers to the drawing together of distant places and experiences as doublings (2008: 1). Doubling recognises that different histories create place and it acknowledges complex connections and disconnections that might allow emancipation from more limiting views of place as bounded by dominant and imperial views (2008: 1). There is evidence of doubling in a 1950s postcard Casey brought in. It was written by her mother and sent to her grandmother in England after the family settled in Gippsland. The inscription on the card reads *there are more English than Aussies in Morwell*. These gestures fray the distinction between belonging and being an outsider and construct place with mobility and care for the past.

Sometimes the women’s memories re/created landscapes where the past surfaces in family yarns that have become myths, as in Jan’s memory of a prized weekly roast dropped in quarry lake long ago, and serendipitously buried beneath a playing field now named after her father:

> It was my brother’s job to carry the weekend roast home. We were never allowed to go to the old brickworks, because it was clay so it was very slippery – and we did of course. And this night he dropped the roast into the water and we tried to get it out, but we couldn’t.

This story family story layers time and place with the history of changes it subtly reveals – from the days when the Sunday roast was a family event and sign of privilege, when bricks were manufactured locally from local materials and so on until now, when a park bears a man’s name and as Jan later said ‘probably hardly anyone now would even know who he was’.

**Contact Zone**

At the launch of *Peripheral Vision*, I was surprised to hear that Jaye had found the workshops challenging. She had participated with humour and enthusiasm, telling poignant stories of her life in Gippsland. She also contributed to lively discussions and debate about social problems when they came up in the conversations and brought in detailed stories she wrote at home. But in hindsight Jaye described her experience of the workshops as being:

> To grow,  
> get out of your comfort zone,  
> gather up your courage, feel the fear,
Find your hill
AND
climb it.

Certainly the Workshops were a contact zone where the opportunity to express difference and multiple ways of knowing, including knowing Gippsland, was possible. Pratt explains contact zones as ‘special places where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each’ (1991: 33). Operating as a contact zone the Workshops provided a safe opportunity to experience and to explore different ideas. One of the participants commented that she ‘was puzzled how such a diverse group could work, however we are an interesting lot, and have become a caring group of friends’ (Dee, 12th March 08).

The completed book, Peripheral Vision: a kaleidoscope of stories by women hints of tolerance and curiosity about difference but it is no panacea. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is an attempt to invoke the sense of a contact zone and encourage readers to allow their own stories to take flight from the fragments:

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\text{With each turn of the hand, the individual fragments of our kaleidoscope fall for a moment into another pattern and begin other stories. (Peripheral Vision, 2008: 2)}
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Stories like the demolition of the Hospital and another about gambling create what Karina Eiliaas refers to as ‘stammers in dominant discourses (2007: 159). Stammers, she explains can disrupt or misrecognize the dominant imaginary (2007: 159), they can create fissures and stimulate new ethical modes of exchange and alternative stories (2007: 159). Even though Peripheral Vision is not a revolutionary text the women’s stories introduce stammers in the dominant representations of Gippsland. In the recognition of difference and concern for the social repercussions of economic and industrial priorities it is a radical departure from other local place stories and histories. Peripheral Vision intimates there are always more experiences to be told, and other versions to be heard. Significantly the women came to value their own experiences, as Kaye expressed in an inscription in the book, ‘thank you for reminding us that our stories are valuable’.

The creative process of working together to achieve a shared outcome in Peripheral Vision stimulated the participants to pursue particular topics that interested them individually. They made connections with other people in the community to research events and brought in photographs, poems, recipes and stories from other women they knew.

**Concluding thoughts**

‘At Home in Gippsland’ set out to investigate the constitution of the feminine in Gippsland however the methodology also proved to be a valuable place-making activity that facilitated the kind of shifts considered important to sustainable futures by Carter (2008), Cameron (2003) and Plumwood (2003).

In the course of daily life, images and representations of dominant aspirations and economic rationalism confront us, surround us, embed us in ‘complex webs of meaning’ (Eilias, 2007: xi). Christopher Tilley (1994: 23) has written, that ‘the landscape is an
anonymous sculptural form always already fashioned by human agency, never
completed, and constantly being added to … the landscape is both a medium for and an
outcome of action and previous histories of action.’ The highly industrialised landscape
of Gippsland is a ‘stage not a backdrop … that propagates a visual ideology masking the
social forces and relations of production’ (Tilley, 1994: 23). My use of collective
biography as a story telling process, and place as an organizing framework enabled the
telling of diverse stories in the Story Workshops. Reflexive conversations loosened the
hold of dominant discourses and story forms, and embodied experiences were shared.

The Workshops offer a sustainable approach to community development by fostering a
place-conscious approach that allows difference to be recognised. The participants were
challenged to listen to different views and creative responses were fostered by the
reflexive practices. Existing networks were strengthened and new connections and
avenues opened as the participants researched their stories further. The Workshops
provide a framework to foster informal learning and community building in adult
education and community activities that are pleasurable.

This paper discussed how cultural practices that inhere in the dominant narratives and
images surround us, shaping the physical and social landscapes of our lives. While
contradictory or ambiguous sensory perceptions of dominant discourses are embodied
consciously and unconsciously, individuals are challenged to construct coherent linear
narratives for the sake of belonging. However, memory work in a collaborative group
takes personal experience as valuable and can disrupt dominant narratives. Memory is
future looking when it expresses dreams and desires based on reflexive awareness. It
moves fluidly across time dimensions and allows participants to engage with different
layers of relatedness, including the relatedness to place that Cameron suggests is
necessary to develop a place-responsive culture (2003: 194). During the Story Workshops
the collaborative processes and methods helped forge new friendships and engaged
women who are largely outside of formal educational programmes. The process provides
a useful approach to engage adults in non-formal learning to strengthen community and
build resilience for the future.

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