

## 10. *Myigrations*

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*Myigrations* is both the title of an artwork and the final chapter of my PhD exegesis submitted in 1999 at the Australian National University. This is an adaptation of that chapter. I've been rewriting it for several years, although I'm not sure why.

*Myigrations* is a large collaged wall map, measuring 373 x 457 x 13 centimetres. I made it straddling 1998-99 and it took almost 3 months to make. This reading commences by reflexively considering the completed work in my PhD exhibition in February 1999 at the Canberra Museum and Gallery. The text then tracks back in time through the processes of making the map and the various personal, cultural and political contexts that underpin its creation.

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### **Thursday 18 February 1999. Opening night of solo exhibition *Beyond Familiar Territory* at Canberra Museum and Gallery**

Up close *Myigrations* is a meticulous patchwork of row upon row of small, overlapping, stamp-sized squares of ocean maps in muted aquamarines and robin egg blues. Our perspective appears to be aerial. Far below we see what could be long rolling swells lapping the shores of a circular chain of tiny islands. There's an uncanny sensation of floating: a vertiginous umbilical spiralling between heaven and Earth.

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### **Friday February 19, 1999.**

I'm walking in the company of a cicada symphony. Heat crackles underfoot. The shadiest streets dictate my walk to the gallery this morning. Last night my exhibition *Beyond Familiar Territory* opened and officially it marks the conclusion to my doctoral studies.

I'm so restless. I miss total immersion in the studio. I'm terribly keen to be with my artworks and I hardly know what to do with myself. It feels strange that my works are locked up in a place I don't have keys to. Each work has been systematically catalogued - measured, valued, insured. Officially art. Officially off limits to touching. But I want people to touch my work.

My mind is a spinning compass. I feel flat, empty, and vulnerable. It's the day after my birthday too. I miss my family terribly.

I worked in the Canadian arctic for 13 summers and planned to settle in Yellowknife. But at 27 my father's premature death at 54 turned my world upside down. I fled

Ottawa, moved west to Vancouver and Victoria, studied visual arts, and through a Commonwealth Scholarship now find myself in 'Canbra' having just completed this PhD. I am in awe of Australia. Except for extreme heat I am in love with this complicated country.

Seeking shade I rest my cheek against the smooth, cold, iron-hard white trunk of a gum. Its bark scarred with scribbly moth tunnels. On impulse I hug the tree. Windowsills and bowls all over the house brim with collections of seeds, nuts and rocks. In the space of four short years I have immersed myself deeply in this land. Maybe there is no return.

I am accompanying this heat-flushed body on her walk, not residing in her. That way I feel the heat less. I recollect a story I wrote in grade 1 in Canada about a kangaroo that got lost on its way to school. I won a silver dollar for writing it and had to read it at a school assembly. Six years later I fainted on same spot during choir practice. Overcome by heat they said.

The change in temperature from skin-scorching sunlight into the freezing gallery feels insanely, ridiculously, fucking cold. Even for me, a veteran, if you will, of Canadian winters and arctic summers (by choice).

It's 10:05 and disappointingly I'm not the first to arrive at my exhibition. A man is sitting directly in front of the big blue collage.

I hover nearby, assuming he'll leave, his contemplation completed or his reverie broken, so I can begin mine. But he doesn't stir. I leave him to it and inspect my other works.

The eleven sculptures in *Beyond Familiar Territory*, some with hundreds of individually constructed components created from maps, is one outcome of my PhD candidacy that also includes an exegesis, and a dissertation with chapters intended to be published separately. All up, probably 60,000 words.

There are as yet no goal posts for this degree. (The term practice-led research is a term I will not hear for another few years). I am the University's first PhD candidate in Visual Arts. Next month, in the gallery, I face three external examiners to defend my thesis. Sadly my PhD journey included my supervisor taking his own life.

*Myigrations* is a work through which I have diverted spectacularly from my thesis objectives of examining relationships between minerals, mapping, mining, consumerism and art. In summary my research is environmental art, art that deals with ecological and economic issues.

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*Myigrations* summoned me and consumed me. I had no plan to make this masive collage - it evolved from deep within. I didn't have time to make it, but I had to. The intensive process of arranging tiny fragments of maps on this scale was physically difficult. The work's relevance to the research question remains unclear. I could not bear to exclude the collage from the exhibition, so we built a separate space for it, to its dimensions, a private viewing room within the gallery. An installation.

I return to find the man still sitting in front of my work. What's with this guy? I tip toe past and perch at the far of the bench to scribble my thoughts about this one work I still have to write about to complete the exegesis. Maybe the curator's decision to put a bench in front of the work wasn't so bad after all.

More minutes pass. I'm mystified by the man's immersion. I sneak a closer look. He could be in his late forties, conservatively, casually, neatly dressed. Long fingers clasped under a long thin face reminds me of El Greco's paintings. This man's eyes sweep across the collage, slowly - east to west, then north to south. The rest of him doesn't move. What is he searching for? What is he thinking?

He rises swiftly to leave and tripping over my words I blurt out after him "What do you think about this artwork?"

I can't believe I just said that!

My words catch him mid-stride. He pauses in the doorway, that liminal zone between here and there, inside and outside. Walking right up to my work he slowly traces two small circles on the map (first clockwise, then anticlockwise). Tilting his head sharply he scans the upper reaches of the work. I'm impressed how the collage dwarfs him; in fact I'm immensely pleased.

Ever so lightly he strokes the surface with the back of his left hand – one long slow stroke. The water ripples.

My ridiculous question hangs between us. Highly uncomfortable I focus on his feet. I gasp because he's wearing white running shoes! Clearly he isn't local, but something of an import, like myself.

Exhaling heavily, and with his back to me, he responds in an utterly predictable North American accent "homelessness", and after another lengthy pause "no permanent place", and walks out.

He didn't once look at me but I have just been x-rayed 1000 times. I get up and stroke the work too. Big fat tears splat on my sunburned toes. Did you know our tears are equally as salty as the ocean?

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## 26 January, 1999, Australia Day

One frustration leads to another. I can't find a square of the darkest blue ocean map and I really need a dark anchoring point along the shoreline of this small island.

Nine tenths of the collaged map is completed. It's taken 170 topographic maps cut into 3cm squares. I think back to the previous two years and how every time I felt terribly out of sync with being in Australia, fragmented by the distance between here and my loved ones in Canada or Holland, I tore or cut maps into these little squares. Then I'd join them together to form a new cloth, a new kind identity, an imaginary land.

According to Marjorie Perloff "...what the collage-piece unravels from the surface of the canvas... is after all, the flight coupon we thought we had lost."

*Myigrations* is created from coastal maps printed in 1944 for wartime distribution in Australia. These wartime maps have caused me to reflect on tensions between different parts of the world and my utopian desire for no more war. I think of Michel Foucault's words "instead of finding reassurances...one is forced to advance beyond familiar territory..."<sup>1</sup> I look at the large broken circle of islands that has emerged at the periphery of the collage and I wish people would realise the many different ways in which we are all interconnected.

My island chain causes me to think back to my experiences of working with international artists in the National Gallery of Australia's 1996 exhibition, *Islands*. I delighted in exercising my French with Annette Messenger and Christian Boltanski. I found it remarkable how at ease Boltanski was in developing a new work in response to an unfamiliar space. His father was a Jew and spent most of the war hidden under the kitchen floorboards. Imagine that! I worked with Montien Boonma from Thailand and helped him construct his sensory rich temple installation created from old wooden pharmaceutical boxes painted with traditional Thai pharmaceutical herbs and spices. *Temple of the Mind* pays homage to his wife who recently died of cancer. I recoiled in horror at the first hand experiences of Chilean artist and ex photo journalist Alfredo Jaar and his absolute disillusionment with the West and the United Nations for not preventing the highly preventable genocide in Rwanda. I imagined the thoughts of German artist Joseph Beuys whose wartime experiences surely still haunted the felt pieces we hung in the gallery. In the centre of my map there is only a vast expanse of

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon, 1972, p. 37.

blue. Not even the tiniest atoll emerges as a foothold on which to locate a *sense of place*.<sup>2</sup> It is this void, this internal loneliness, the gentleman sitting in front of my collage picked up on.

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**December 26, 1998**

I'm restless. The collage is taking ever so long to make. I'm worried I won't finish in time for the exhibition in February.

It's burning hot. The most bearable place, if not in Canberra's shopping malls and cinemas, is here on the sculpture studio's vast red lino floor.

I'm sitting on a calico sheet of about four-square meters made by sewing together two long lengths of cloth. I've done my best to keep the stitching as flat creates a barely perceptible spine down the middle of the collage.

The cool concrete keeps the mid-summer heat at bay. I shift my position every few minutes because my legs get in the way of my brush, or they fall asleep. I cross one, sometimes both, or tuck my legs beneath me. Other times I stretch my legs straight out in front, or I lie on my side. I think of Aboriginal painters sitting on the ground. Most of my life is spent living off the ground - in cars, chairs and beds, and at desks in boring coloured office chairs.

I've done five hours today; carefully choosing the right colour of blue map fragment and delicately pasting each square onto the cotton ground and just overlapping the edges of neighbouring squares. Except for the occasional screeching of gang gangs and sulphur-crested cockatoos it is very still.

In Canada right now my mother will be listening to Christmas hymns on CBC classic FM, while a turkey roasts to golden perfection. She'll serve apple, sage and wild rice stuffing and the gloriously red homemade cranberry sauce quivering in the high-stemmed cut lead crystal bowl. Candlelight. Snow sparkling on the windowsills, cedar

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<sup>2</sup> "Sense of place" is also the title of an exhibition catalogue of works by Rosalie Gascoigne and Colin McCahon. One of my first entries into this report was in 1995, returning to Australia from an exhibition in Holland and travelling via Canada. Taken from a KLM inflight magazine I copied "Our day-to-day existence is lived in a familiar land: the place where we work, the place where we sleep and the places we go when we're doing neither. Together, these locations give us a geography of existence; a sense of self and place." *KLM Herald*, Nov., 1995, p.34. Svetlana Alpers has written that "Maps give us quantifiable data - the measure of a place in relation to another place whereas landscapes give us a feeling or sense of a place" in Alpers, 1987, p. 5. In consideration of this I believe I endeavoured to homogenise the two.

trees, and neighbouring rooftops. A pine and oak fire crackling and empty sherry glasses dotting the sitting room. I hum Silent Night.

With every few pieces I paste I oscillate between north and south of the Equator, between the accounts of arctic explorers in the north and south Poles, and what I know of my family's history in France, Indonesia and Holland.

I recall my grandmother's stories of raising her daughters during World War II in The Netherlands. She hand sewed dresses for her girls by unpicking and cutting up her own threadbare garments and made big ribbons for their milk-coloured hair.

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A large poster-sized picture-map of the world hangs above my childhood bed. The original was painted in watercolours for the oceans are translucent currents of cool blues and warmer turquoises, while the deserts bleed yellow and red. The map has a plain white border, which I imagine keeps Earth from spilling into space.

Different countries are identified through a smattering of iconic animals, and people in traditional dress.

Canada, our new home, is depicted as a vast, snow-and-tree covered expanse. Moose, beavers, wolves and various kinds of bears, dot the vast landmass. It gives me great satisfaction to associate our adopted country with these majestic mammals.

I can't see anything marking the location of tiny Holland, the country of my birth. Possibly it is too small to fit anything about it on this map. My young heart aches at the omission so I pencil in an iconic windmill.

From the vantage point of my homemade wooden bed, innumerable journeys take me across red deserts, through thick and thinning clouds, over polar and tropical seas, and around and around the North and South Poles. Where there is water I cross in a wooden boat with a single red sail.

Standing on my bed I like to trace an awkward route between Holland, Indonesia, and Canada. I have an Indonesian grandmother, but she claims to be Portuguese. I have met her only twice. Sometimes I fantasise being on Java and join my Dad, his little brother Jaap, and Zwarte Oma my grandmother in the Japanese prisoner of war camps they endured from 1942-45.

I beg my father to share his stories about the camps, but he always says it was too terrible to talk about. I know he was hungry most of that time and that his little brother

almost died. From a very young age I understand that some people enjoy being terribly cruel towards others.

But sometimes Papa relents and he tells me a story. It goes something along the lines of plugging dirt, and on one occasion a piece of fruit, far too rotten to eat, in the exhaust pipe of a Japanese military jeep. The thrill was watching a mess come shooting out when the engine started. What if he'd been caught?

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It's too hot. The acrylic medium dries on my brush. Sweat mingles with a few stray tears. Papa, Indonesia and the picture map above my childhood bed slip away. I'm having trouble piecing together the western shore of an island. I keep searching for an appropriate piece of map, but I can't find one. I put this island aside and start another.

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**Northern Labrador, Canadian Arctic, sometime in July 1992.**

A strike of the match.

I don't smoke. But my excuse for lighting up is that life is so incredibly healthy up here that I just need to do something unhealthy. Actually I'm nervous - even though I try to convince myself that I'm not.

My other excuse is that smoke keeps mosquitoes at bay. At dawn this morning they were hitting the tent, no pounding is more like it - like rain. I was almost fooled into putting on my raincoat before emerging from my downy nest. Yesterday, with one slap of the hand, we counted 121 mosquitoes and blackflies!

I sit quietly in the doorway of my canvas home - matching the stillness of an Arctic summer day. There's not a breath of wind. My outstretched legs rest on gravel and lichen. A small sharp rock protruding through the tent floor is poking my bum.

I hardly draw on the cigarettes, but I keep lighting them.

My ears are pricked.

I constantly scan the horizon for any movement.

It's a gorgeous summer morning. Across from where I sit are breathtakingly beautiful iceberg and island studded expanses of emerald blue Arctic Ocean sweeping east towards Greenland. From the helicopter I can sometimes make out the distant shores of Baffin Island. I love this country. It is painfully beautiful, and dangerous. It makes me feel so alive.

But I'm almost too afraid to move. I mustn't be disarmed and risk dozing off in the warm sunshine. As much as I hate guns the cold steel against my thigh is reassuring. For a moment I wish for safety on one of those islands, out there in the icy blue ocean, but that's no help. There are polar bears out there too.

I chastise myself for my fear, but the memory of being charged by a grizzly bear ten years ago on a similar geological expedition is still all too fresh.

AND, at about 1:00 this morning our chopper pilot woke up the whole camp with a blood-curdling scream. A bear was attacking the helicopter he was sleeping in. None of us slept much after that. Where did that polar bear go?

My favourite postcard is a reproduction of Jan Vermeer's *Woman Reading A Letter*. Hearing the drone of the plane's arrival with the mailbag and our food order is a monthly highlight. I love receiving a letter, someone else's thoughts I can absorb slowly, over and over, in my own time. I think back to the thousands of letters I have written in the quiet moments of endless daylight days, when icebergs twinkle in the distance, the ocean is a mirror, and islands and clouds impossible to separate from their reflections. When I'm here I want to share with you how narwhales startle me with their blasts of icy air.

I try to explain in my letters what true silence is like, of my near silent excursions in the canoe, slicing the paddle through freezing ocean, lake, and river waters. I try to explain in my letters what it is like to be alone all day, in the so-called middle of nowhere, to work with geologists who also love their work, and talk about the age of Earth in billions of years. In my letters I describe my joy at walking endless shorelines, in the tracks of bears and wolves and caribou, and at the interface of land and water where Inuit people still draw sustenance. In my letters I share daily menus and my trials and tribulations of cooking in 'bush' camp conditions and hauling buckets of water from frozen shores.

But I know that unless you've been to this kind of place - where one is humbled by beauty, silence, and the spirit of all things, and that in the larger scheme of things you are both nothing and everything - you won't understand my letters because they are slow and minutely detailed. I wonder from which port Vermeer's painted letter was sent forth?

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## **Epilogue**

I live in Fremantle now because I love the ocean and the excitement of a port full of international arrivals and blasts of departures. I try to connect ships with countries of origin, and cargo with destinations. Memories of docks in Rotterdam, London, Montreal, New York, Sydney and Port Hedland flood forth. I think also about human cargo and my friend Hanh from Vietnam, her narrow escape from pirates (her parents locked her in the boat's safe), and coming here to absorb the ambiguous identity of "refugee." I wonder if that identity ever ends.

I treasure a small book handed down to me by my grandmother. It was written by a co-survivor of the internment camp in Java that my father endured with her for almost three years. In it is a photo of my grandmother. And I always meant to ask, but forgot and then it was too late, what my father remembered of his journey from war-ravaged Indonesia to war-ravaged Holland and what kind of vessel it was that carried him across so many lengths of ocean. Perhaps there lies a clue in his last drawing - a ship - I asked him to sketch when we both knew he was dying. Sadly I've lost it. But accompanying *Myigrations* is an old toy freight canoe made from a powdered milk tin. It was found on a small island way up in the arctic. I keep it above my home's hearth.