‘The Venae Cavae’

Vol 1:
An exegesis

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Dedication

I would like to thank Dr Virginia Shepherd for her inspiration, patience and love throughout the course of this project.

I dedicate this work to her with heartfelt appreciation for her support.
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

signed ______________________________________________________
Contents:

Table of figures.................................................................6
Abstract.............................................................................7
Introduction........................................................................9
Chapter 1: Political atmosphere - 1980s...............................19
Chapter 2: The noise in the background...............................31
  Affect contagion...............................................................35
  Affect contagion as a Small World Network.......................38
  Use of Affect by social and political movements...............47
  Affective bonds...............................................................63
  Ananda Marga and affective bonds....................................67
  Sketch of AM movement...............................................69
  AM as family.................................................................71
  AM and emotion............................................................74
  AM and persecution.......................................................76
Chapter 3: What are characters? Where do they come from?
  Why are they still here?...................................................81
Chapter 4: St Kilda – ex-centric city....................................91
Conclusion...........................................................................98
References..........................................................................100

Novel: ‘1983’ (Vol 2)
Table of Figures

Fig 1: Women march at Pine Gap Women’s Peace Camp ..................... 54
Fig 2: Hair cutting tent at Pine Gap Women’s Peace Camp ............... 56
Fig 3: MAUM leaflet .................................................................... 58
Fig 4: ‘Die-in’ at Pine Gap Women’s Peace Camp ............................. 59
Fig 5: MAUM street theatre .......................................................... 60
Fig 6: Flyer .................................................................................. 61
Abstract

My novel, *1983*, is a political novel in the sense that it is concerned with characters in a position of marginality and their interactions with the state, during a time dominated by public fear. In the exegesis I explore how interactions are affective, visceral, constructed as networks through which political ideas spread, like the chemical or electrical signals in the body. Documents, including texts created by protest organisations, were used in writing the novel, not to convey an objective truth about what happened, but to help create the texture of the times. The media, both mainstream and ex-centric, is the noise in the background, generating the heartbeat, the pulse of the novel, its messages conveyed through the characters’ social networks and relationships, as adrenaline and cortisol, the chemicals of fear and action, are conveyed in the blood.

Incorporated into the introduction of the exegesis, are issues of searching for a generic model for the novel, and dilemmas about the use of archival material, which relate to decisions about what kind of novel I was setting out to write.

Chapter one of the exegesis examines the political atmosphere of the early 1980s, and gauges the affective register of a time characterised by the fear of nuclear holocaust. The political fear of the 80s is viewed in relation to fear and threat in today’s society, and to issues of power and control. Revisiting the ambient fear of the late Cold War era was necessary in writing of *1983*, to help establish a context for the characters.

The second chapter views the media as a purveyor and amplifier of affect, and links affect contagion theoretically to Small World Networks. These ideas helped stimulate the writing of the novel and some of its preoccupations, including changes in systems, affective bonding, and group synchrony. The use of affect by social and political movements is explored through my past experiences of protest, the movement’s own media and collective identity. Affective bonds are explored via an examination of the Eastern religious sect the
Ananda Marga, (AM) which is viewed as an intense expression of an organisation as ‘family’. Research into AM and other social and political organisations of the 1980s was necessary in the writing for the creation of some of the novel’s main characters and their narratives.

In chapter three, St Kilda, the main ‘place’ of the novel, is revisited as an eccentric city in view of the relationship between cities and characters, and the idea of a city being a fractal, with those on its periphery providing momentum and change.

The fourth chapter views issues of characterization which came up for me during the writing of 1983 – questions about the persistence of character in fiction and the relationship between character and the self.

The exegesis was written concomitantly with 1983 and helped establish the novel’s themes, including politics and affect, affective cities, networks and belonging. The process of writing the exegesis provided a forum for reflexive analysis, and for issues that arose in the writing, including characterization, and the relationship between fiction and history.
Introduction

How do I enter this city? This novel?

Open the atlas of anatomy. A sharp smell wafts up, of old, though still good quality paper, the shiny pages threatening to fall apart as you gently flick them over. Your fingers trace the hand-drawings of dissections, by the artist, Miss Nancy Joy.

The cross-section through the shoulder joint, exposing the Head of the Humerus, the Mammary Gland of the Female, the Cutaneous Nerves of the Back, the Structures of the Posterior Abdominal Wall. Interspersed among the illustrations, the neat notes, the lists, the jottings in fountain pen, by some long-ago medical student, cramming for exams. The growths of bright red clinging veins, spreading over grey sectioned flesh. An eye pops from the orbital cavity. Pancreatic ducts resemble the silvery roots of plants. The skull-cap is removed, the dura is peeled and pinned-back and the convolutions of the cerebral cortex are visible through the cobweb-like arachnoid matter.

The city reverberates with the geography of the body. At the centre of the novel’s living city is the metaphoric heart, and leading into it, the ‘venae cavae’, the heart’s passage, the two great veins which drain the upper and lower portions of the body. Through the venae cavae the exhausted blood shifts its direction, from one side of the heart to the other. This is the moment of change, the phase transition of the chemist, the point at which a thing becomes its opposite. Alchemy. The corpuscles of the blood move ‘…in a circle continuously’ (Harvey, qtd. in Nuland 210) yet the threats to life are omnipresent - the drugs ingested for pleasure, the radioactivity unleashed by nuclear war, the hidden virus in the blood, the risk of disaffection.

In the western Aristotelian view the heart is the centre of the soul, the seat of feeling, the centre of affectivity. In the Eastern view the heart is the palace of mental worship and three-eyed Isha, the divinity worshipped in the centre, which
can grant boons and dispel fear. The heart has its own independent synchronicity, yet it receives constant messages from the body, which inspire both love and fear, fluttering, palpitation, the threat of chaos.

A novel is similar to a city, as Ian McEwan recently said in his speech accepting the Jerusalem Prize. A novel isn’t merely a book, but “a particular kind of mental space, a place of exploration, of investigation into human nature…” (McEwan). In his speech McEwan was comparing the instinctively democratic nature of the literary form of the novel, to a city, in its encompassment and articulation of human plurality and difference. When I began to write the novel, 1983, I had in mind a cityscape, that of St Kilda in Melbourne in the early 80s, and a group of connected characters who inhabited and explored the mental and physical places of this city.

I knew, in the beginning, that this had to be a novel of multiple characters, and therefore multiple narrative threads. I’d thought it needed to be so, to express the ‘feeling’ of the times, different aspects of what was happening then, characters reacting to the environment in different ways. Character and theme, I think, determine structure – and the kind of structure which evolved was one of multiple storylines, a ‘multiplot’ - problematic, as this can ‘soften’ the telling (McKee 49), resulting in a less dynamic work.

I read and re-read novels which gathered multiple characters around a central theme or idea. Novels including The Children’s Bach, Honour, Other People’s Children, Riders in the Chariot, As I Lay Dying, The Slap. But I was unable to find a ‘model’ for this book. Lessing’s The Four-Gated City, which portrays an intersecting of lives during a particular time or milieu, is perhaps the novel which comes closest.

Early drafts of 1983 seemed too fragmented – it did not have a major narrative strand which would act as a central cohesive spine, connecting the diverse stories and encouraging a reader to continue on. Resolution lay in the linking of main characters and their narrative threads to the theme of the fear of nuclear war, and
in writing key scenes into the narrative which would bring characters together in their experience of fear. An example in 1983 is a scene where the characters mistake a dramatic dust storm engulfing St Kilda for nuclear fallout.

I was writing about a time when the possibility of nuclear war was of great concern to many. I had been involved in protest movements in the 80s – and so set out to write this fictionalised ‘history’ from the point of view of those opposed to the arms race, to approach the writing from a position of marginality, ‘ex-centric’, outside the mainstream, and yet dependent on that centre for situating itself.

Parts of the novel drew on social and political movements in the early 80s, the anti-uranium movement and the Ananda Marga. Some of the sources for the writing were documents and ephemera produced by protest organisations. The work, as it progressed, though, became broader than that in its depiction of different kinds characters and their ways of viewing the world. But all characters in the novel could be considered outside of the mainstream in different ways – there is a cat woman, characters with intellectual disabilities (Robin and Derrick), a uranium miner. The novel’s landscapes extended beyond St Kilda - characters travelled to Sydney, to the desert, protested at the Olympic Dam uranium mine, near Woomera in South Australia. A character became a member of Ananda Marga and travelled to India to see his guru.

I wondered what kind of novel this could be. Was it a historical novel? Could the 1980s be counted as ‘history’? How would I place this novel in relation to others? Was it a political novel? In my search for a genre for my novel I looked for examples of contemporary ‘political fiction’.

Michael Wilding writes that a political novel resists narrow definition, categories overlap (1). A political novel may also be an historical novel, a utopian fantasy, a social novel, a satire. Political fictions may be science fiction, magic realism,

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1 Linda Hutcheon uses ‘ex-centric’ to describe the de-centered perspective, the marginal, “…ineluctably identified with the center it desires and is denied” (Hutcheon 60).
detective fiction, a fable, an allegory, a poem, and do not necessarily need to include representations of protest or political parties in order to comment politically on society.

But what is meant by political fiction? In this post-modern, post-structuralist era, does the genre “political fiction” any longer exist? In many contemporary works I would consider ‘political’ there’s often a melding of genre, a diffusion of boundaries. Fiction and non-fiction and/or a range of genres may be combined.

Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, for example, blends fiction, autobiography and dream, which, Berlatsky writes, “… works to show the impossibility of rigid genre distinctions as well as the inherent fictionalizing of reality and the inherent reality of fiction” (119). Another example is Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which uses multiple generic conventions including biography, autobiography, comic book, animal fable and history, and which also differentiates his work from a holocaust survivor’s testimony or a historical document. Christos Tsiolkas’s *Dead Europe* combines travelogue, horror/ghost/vampire stories, and queer literature, and is deeply political in its exploration of guilt through its violation of social and cultural norms and behaviours. By using a range of genres these works resist a solidifying label such as ‘political fiction’, and yet are political in their engagement with social concerns and ideas.

In arguing the case for literary fiction James Bradley states: “Serious writing, like all art, is by its very nature transgressive. It refuses definition, refuses control, and that is in itself a threat to many. One only has to watch the ferocity with which totalitarian regimes police the works of novelists to understand the threat the freedom of the page poses” (12).

Despite the dangers of rigidifying genre boundaries, the “political novel” may nonetheless serve powerful purposes. For example, Ian Syson bemoans the fact that the political novel is “off the agenda” of all large and many small publishers. In his introduction to the 2002 edition of Amanda Lohrey’s *The Morality of Gentlemen* he writes that such a novel is needed now, at a time of “rampant
political reaction”(7). Based on a 1949 industrial dispute on the Hobart waterfront, and resurrected in 2002, twenty years after it was first published, *Morality* is a book which has at its core historical shifts concerning the collapse of effective working class militancy. It connects with and parallels contemporary changes in labour movements.

In fact, *The Morality of Gentlemen* could be described as ‘historiographic metafiction’, the term invented by Linda Hutcheon to describe a new mode of historical fiction. “Historiographic because such fiction demonstrates a self-reflexive awareness of the constructive act of writing history; ‘metafiction’ because texts of this order interrogate the very conditions and possibilities of their own acts of representation”(Wilcox 2). In historiographic metafiction the search for “…some privileged centre of meaning is constantly displaced and dispersed, as well as the traditional notion of history as a non-contradictory continuity”(Wilcox 2).

1983, I’d thought, would shape up to be a political fiction in its depictions of marginal viewpoints, but would not attempt to be representative of any particular view. Afterall, those ex-centric people who were part of the protest movements I wanted to write about, did not make up a homogenous whole, but were a de-centralised community of differences. They constituted a “…multiplicity to a common perceived position of marginality and ex-centricity” (Hutcheon 62).

1983 would be concerned with individuals and their interactions and relationships – with themes of belonging and not-belonging, alternative families and groups and ways of living, conformity and extremism and activism. I was interested in networks, systems - how these evolve and how ideas spread within them, how we exist in a web of interactions - that is what we are.

In order to research this time, these events, I needed to look at media and documents generated by anti-nuclear and other political and social movements of the 1980s, as well as mainstream media, to help me remember how it was then, to ‘get’ the language, the imagery.
Michael Wilding writes that the incorporation of documentary materials into the political novel is necessary to ‘establish the texture of the created society, to provide the data for the sociology’ (Wilding 10). In Kangaroo Lawrence quoted actual clippings from the Australian press and incorporated them into a collage process (Wilding 9). In 1984 Orwell invented his documents in the form of an imaginary book and the Newspeak appendix, thus moving beyond realism and extending the novel’s scope (Wilding 9). Lessing, in The Four-Gated City drew on imaginary novels, diaries, letters, notes, shopping lists and actual historical events to substantiate the theme of the breakdown of society (Lessing).

And so I searched for the primary documents, the newsletters, posters, pamphlets and ephemera of 1980s protest groups. I talked to people I knew who were involved in movements then, friends and acquaintances, asked them to remember what it was like. There were many dinner-table discussions – stories which became the basis of some of the narratives in the novel. People showed or lent me their personal archives, their scrapbooks of clippings, photographs, collections of old Dawns or Tribunes, posters, badges, bits of memorabilia – and I had my own caches of things, rolled-up tattered posters in the corner of a wardrobe, boxes of badges, photograph albums. But what I needed was a comprehensive archive – Boons comments that the writing of history is only possible because of archives, a documentary heritage, relied upon by historians as concrete evidence of the past. This documentary heritage is “…the material source of a society’s historical consciousness” (3). I needed to review a range of different materials and documents in order to see the relationships between things and get an overall picture, as documentary sources do not “possess an inherent value discernable within the documents themselves” (Booms 82). The value of an item only becomes apparent when it’s set in relation to something else and compared with that other thing.

Fortunately, documents pertaining to many of these organisations have been preserved at the University of Melbourne’s Community, Political and Cultural Organisations archive. These collections covered diverse areas and included records of political parties and lobby groups, peace and anti-uranium organisations. I selected three of these collections to look at: ‘Women for
Survival’, ‘Movement Against Uranium Mining’ and ‘People for Nuclear Disarmament’, organisations which were extremely active during the early 1980s. The information gleaned from the material proved to be valuable documentary and background material for the novel.

The archival material included written and visual material - press clippings, speeches, slogans, chants, discussion papers, newsletters, scrapbooks, correspondence, photographs and ephemera including posters, badges and stickers. Some of the collections were extremely large (Movement Against Uranium Mining (MAUM) included twelve cartons of material.) The ideologies of the organisations, the way they saw themselves and how they viewed those in power, were contained here, within their own media, I thought.

I wrote in my journal:

_The first box is before me in the hushed, amiable, cultural collections reading room in the Bailleu Library at the University of Melbourne. Out the window a red umbrella moves across the iridescent green of a campus quadrangle. Rain glistens in the foliage of trees. I open the box and ease out a crammed-together bunch of stuffed-full manila folders. A strong scent of incense, trapped for decades, wafts out of the yellowed papers. I look around, almost guiltily, but no-one else has noticed, or cares. Is there something naughty, or deviant about these files? As I turn over the pages, some marked with coffee-cup rings, scan the faded type-face, or scrawled handwriting, I imagine an office, a room in an old terrace, the fug of smoke, the gestetner machine in the corner, and the rhythmic sound of typing, the clang of the carriage return. The group, huddled around the table do not look up as I slip into the room. As always, when looking at documents, I feel the characters, I’ve entered their time._

There’s a plethora of material. Multiple copies of things. Amongst it all are activists’ personal papers, including detailed first-hand accounts of political actions, such as rallies and street theatre, the Pine Gap women's action and the Roxby Downs (Uranium mine) blockades of the early 1980s, as well as the ‘vigil’ community existing in the desert at the fringes of the Roxby mining village.
How do I select what’s needed? How do I know what I’ll need? My selection process was inevitably influenced by the issues and themes I wanted to explore in relation to the novel – including politics and affect, networks and belonging.

As I began to build a picture out of oral stories and from the physical material I was looking at, I began to think about issues of truth and history. Do these documents represent the ‘truth’ about this particular history? And if so, whose truth? The documents came from an archive; a selection process was involved, with some things included, others omitted, depending on the personal considerations, ideological perspectives, or the whims of whoever collected the material. Or things get lost – all is arbitrary. Then after that came my selection process, again, arbitrary. And the documents themselves, including photographs, are textualised, constructed.

In The Morality of Gentlemen, the narrator, an academic researcher, interviews a range of participants, from scabs to militants, in the hope of discovering reliable witnesses, and uncovering the truth about what happened in an industrial dispute: “Within these parameters of neutrality I’ll be trying to do the right thing by you, the reader. I’ll be trying to eliminate the Point of View. To present a mirror, not a prism” (Lohrey 31). The novel demonstrates, however, the impossibility of such a task. The narrator’s efforts are undermined by a range of witnesses, including transcripts of oral interviews, note-book entries, film clips, newspaper articles, letters, court transcripts, which provide a discordant and irreconcilable story. These documents, voices and texts, these “textualised remains of the past” (Hutcheon 96), did not present one story, but many, and the ‘objective truth’ of the matter could not be pieced together.

Wilcox writes, in discussing a similar historical character in Don DeLillo’s Libra, that historical events are “…unstable, ‘combustible’, subject to the play of difference, their significance ‘branches’ in multiple directions. And if historical evidence is textual, historical study can hardly be distinguished from literary study” (341).
There are no absolutes – that’s the truth. The situation is akin to the demolition of logical positivism in science by quantum physics and relativity. As physicist Joseph Gerver wrote:

If we accept multiple universes then we no longer need worry about what really happened in the past, because every possible past is equally real. Therefore, to avoid…insanity, we can, with clear consciences, arbitrarily define reality as that branch of the past that agrees with our memories (qtd. in Wolf 304).

As the writer of a novel, then, I’ll approach my sources with a particular way of thinking. Not with the idea of writing a definitive history, or fictional history that attempts accuracy, but more as a way of looking at and thinking about a certain period in time, and the issues and themes that the period might raise, and the resonances those themes may have with the present. Ultimately, it is my 1983. The creative work which will emerge is influenced by my memories and perceptions, by the things I choose to explore, and the characters are me. Is 1983 then, a political novel? I think it is, in so much that politics is a presence in the novel’s background and that a theme of the novel will be connection and belonging during a time influenced by public fear. In this essay I explore political fear in the 1980s, affect contagion and its use by social and political movements, affective bonds and small world networks, as these are the theoretical ideas which underpinned the writing of 1983.

Politics can be compared to a body, constructed through interactions between systems and subsystems, organs and the cells. This is the reason for my title, the venae cavae, the massive portals that let blood flow into the heart. ‘The noise in the background’, as Amanda Lohrey describes the media that helps establish the context of a political novel, may well be a kind of heartbeat. Thus we find that politics, based on the interactions between individuals, the media and the state, is visceral, neurophysiological, fundamentally emotional. Political ideas, via the media and other Small World Networks can spread like wildfire. They are contagious, alive.
What motivated people to go against the system, to protest or not? How did the threat, the possibility of world annihilation affect life? How and where did protesters or those who were ‘outsiders’ find a place for themselves? Why was there an upsurge in cults at the time? What is it like to be part of a cult, a political organisation, a collective, a tight-knit group? What were the glues that held people together? In order to find a way, it seems obvious to look to theories and ideas about affect – it is a vital element in the understanding of human interaction, in the spread of ideas, thoughts, feelings, the movements of groups, of crowds, of the public.
1. Political Atmosphere - 1980s

I lived in St Kilda in 1980/81 for about 18 months. Not long, yet the place affected me profoundly - it was a significant time in my life. Although I’d already spent three years away from home as a university student, and had a year off before that, this was my first real ‘leaving home’, the first time I’d left Queensland to live elsewhere. I’d travelled as far away from Queensland as I could. The sunshine state Premier was the right-wing Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, impossible to shift due to an electoral gerrymander. In my late teens I’d already experienced years in the civil liberties movement, fighting the street-march ban, getting arrested, living in a state of paranoia, of being ‘watched’ by the police.

I had wanted to live in a ‘real’ city, as far from the Sunshine Coast as possible. I rejected the surf culture, the small-town narrow-mindedness I’d grown up with. I wanted to be involved in politics, activism, embrace new, exciting political thought and cultural changes. New music, new feminism. I wanted to experiment with everything – I wanted the city.

We were drawn to St Kilda - a group of us who’d met at a regional university, all of us from the country. St Kilda had a plethora of cheap accommodation. It was close to the city, close to everything – music venues, cafes, and across the river in Fitzroy was the Universal Workshop\(^2\) and the Women’s Cultural Palace.\(^3\) There was the beach at St Kilda, though it was a dirty, tawdry beach, unlike the clean sands and raging surf we were used to. But we were not there for the beach.

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\(^2\) The Universal Workshop in Fitzroy, Melbourne, was a disused warehouse transformed into an alternative-lifestyle ideal of theatre space, galleries, cafes, studios, performance space and 24-hour dope smoking.

\(^3\) The nearby Women’s Cultural Palace was the base for many feminist groups including Women’s Liberation Switchboard; Women Against Rape; Lesbian Action Group; Women's Health Group; Women Behind Bars; Women's Abortion Action Committee; Anarchist-Feminist Group; Women and Children in Transition; Women's Liberation Radio Group; Women's Liberation Open Consciousness Raising Group; Women's Theatre Group; Lesbian Newsletter Collective; Women's Liberation Bookshop; Women's massage group; Vashit; Women's Liberation Newsletter Collective; Women's Liberation newsletter; Scarlet Woman collective and Sybylla Press.
We wanted St Kilda because of its edginess, its reputation as a place for artists. A science fiction writer had a studio in my building: I would hear the repetitive sound of his manual typewriter constantly tapping. Albert Tucker lived in Blessington Street, opposite the gardens. A friend of mine would ‘stalk’ him - lie in wait and watch him potter in his garden. The rock band, The Boys Next Door, lived for a while in a flat next door to mine. The groups, Painters and Dockers, and Mondo Rock were based in St Kilda. Bands proliferated, playing at venues such as the Electric Ballroom, Earl’s Court, the Seaview. We saw Midnight Oil for the first time in a St Kilda venue, were stunned by the power and energy of this new and exciting band. St Kilda had its problems, but it was a culturally vibrant place, a cosmopolitan city, a place of ex-centricity.

St Kilda was on ‘the edge’, there was an element of danger. The streets were a sanctum for sex-workers, gutter-crawlers, junkies. We lived at the fringes of this world, this underworld which intersected our lives.

When I think of St Kilda of that time, I think of bland, white skies - wide, stark streets. A little jetty, jutting into a flat sea. I remember Leo’s Spaghetti Bar with its constellation of orange lights, the strip joints and sex shops, the clubs along the esplanade, the street kids under the glaring fluorescent lights of the Fitzroy Street snack bar that sold ‘smack’ hamburgers. I remember the strange club we discovered, disguised as a warehouse. I remember the squats, a rat on a pile of washing-up, the cat woman lugging her bags of chopped liver, a flasher on a deserted strip of beach, a racehorse swimming in the sea at dawn. I remember the elderly Jewish residents on the trams, the shift of a sleeve revealing a tattooed number.

In the time of the novel – the early 1980s, Australia was struggling out of economic recession. The 1980s is often characterized as a decade of greed, of excess, with the exploits of multi-millionaire entrepreneurs filling the pages of tabloids such as the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mirror for weeks at a time (Wright 417). It’s easily forgotten though that the early 80s in Australia was a time of recession, of high unemployment, of cuts to jobs and social services, and overshadowing everything was a Cold War epidemic of fear.
St Kilda was badly hit at the time, by poverty, unemployment and a rising cost of living. The city had attracted a large number of tenants and unemployed people due to the availability of relatively cheap rental accommodation. There were a lot of street kids about - a special Delta taskforce established in 1982, concluded that there were problems in St Kilda of child prostitution, child pornography, and child drug abuse (Longmire 256). Kids drifted in from the outer western suburbs, attracted by the excitement of the city. Drugs were everywhere - heroin and barbiturates such as Tiunal, Mandrax and Seconal (which cost $2 a pill on Fitzroy Street in 1979) were widely available and on the rise (Longmire 256). The increase in drug use corresponded, as it does, with a rise in crime, prostitution, violence and homelessness. A large number of people were on benefits and pensions: (31 percent of the population of St Kilda in 1983) (Longmire 297). Unregistered rooming houses proliferated, profiteering from people with psychiatric, mental and physical disabilities.

It was also a city on the verge of change, a process of gentrification was about to begin, with the drift of professionals back from the outer suburbs to inner city areas, causing a widening gap between rich and poor (Longmire 242). I remember the demolitions – large, older houses, whole streets even, being bulldozed by developers to meet the demand for new flats. People were evicted from squats; former boarding houses were being bought up by couples or individuals and renovated.

These changes, coupled with a high level of crime and drug use, saw the city in 1982/83 in a time of crisis and social disintegration. Many political activists lived in St Kilda, as well as Fitzroy, across the river. It’s in St Kilda in 1983 that I place my characters – a place of belonging, and not-belonging. A place of flux and change. This is the novel’s time and place – the place I began with, in the writing.

*  
When thinking and writing about a time, an era, when creating a fictional ‘world’, when trying to understand what it was like to live then, it is vital to be able to gauge the atmosphere of the time, the affective register. The late Cold
War era of the early 1980s in Australia was characterised by a fear epidemic which spread into other areas of life including the control, surveillance and labelling of political groups and individuals.

As Massumi notes, there’s nothing new in fear being a constant in politics and culture, its waves rippling through history, but in the post World War II era, public fear, organised fear, evolved to widen its scope, cyclically saturating social space, particularly via the mass media’s increasing pervasiveness (Politics). In the early eighties, I would argue, low-level, and at times high-level, fear of nuclear holocaust was the “affective Musak” of the era. I know that I felt it, and so did my friends. The Cold War era had affected our lives to the extent that we didn’t know whether we would have a future.

Australian Prime Minister Malcom Fraser, labelled a “Cold War warrior” by Paul Kelly, was, like US President Ronald Reagan, a hard-line anti-communist, and took a strong and unswerving stance against the Soviets (1). Following the invasion of Afghanistan by Russia in 1980, Fraser supported the US call for a boycott of the Moscow Olympics, boosted defence spending, and consolidated and tightened Australia’s alliance with the United States, including support for US bases on Australian soil (Kelly 1). Fraser stated he believed that Russia always wanted to expand, and there was a risk that the Soviets could take control of Middle East oil and threaten the economies of developed nations (Kelly 1). Following resistance from the Australian Olympic Federation to the Moscow Olympics boycott proposal, Fraser warned that there could be a world war within three years. “How many lives is a medal worth? How many people have to be killed by Soviet armies before we will have total unity in this country on whether or not to compete in Moscow?” (Kelly 1). The locus of fear, the Soviet threat, the threat of nuclear war was clearly articulated by leaders at the time. Casper Weinberger, in 1982, told the National Press Club in Canberra that the United States must be prepared to fight and win a nuclear war against the Soviets ("Torn"). Reagan, in his address to the National Association of Evangelicals in Florida in March, 1983 cast the Soviets in religious terms, famously labelling them “the evil empire” (Reagan 1983). A sense of danger and crisis was built
up, which alarmed the Soviets as well as domestic populations and underlying it, was a justification for an increase in defence budgets and forces.

Brian Massumi notes that threat is real when it is “…felt to be real” ("Future" 54). (Italics not mine.) In discussing George Bush’s 2004 campaign for a second term as president, Massumi notes that Bush argued it was right to go to war in Iraq even though no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction were ever actually found. Bush argued that America was made safer because an enemy was removed who “…had the capacity of producing weapons of mass destruction, and could have passed that capability to terrorists bent on acquiring them” (Schmitt and Stevenson qtd in Massumi "Future" 53).

Massumi proposes that whether the danger was real or not, “…the menace was felt in the form of fear” (Massumi "Future" 54). He writes that fear “…is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter” (Massumi "Future" 54). (Italics not mine.) Furthermore, threat’s felt reality gives legitimacy to preemptive action (Massumi "Future" 54). “Any action taken to preempt a threat from emerging into a clear and present danger is legitimated by the affective fact of fear, actual facts aside” (Massumi "Future" 54).

The logic of preemption, based on fear and perceived threat, an “affect-driven logic”, (Massumi "Future" 55) legitimised Australia entering the war on Iraq. The ideological basis of the Cold War was very different to George Bush’s justifications for the War on Terror. The Soviet Union was a world power armed with nuclear weapons. However, the Cold War arms race was justified by preemptive logic. It was irrational – based on the constantly shifting need to keep ahead. Nuclear deterrence was seen by many as “nuclear madness”. In the 1980s the term “preemptive strike” was part of everyday language. Whether the original threat was real or not, protection and safety of the populace by the US government rested on the massive build-up of nuclear arms against the enemy.
In the early 1980s, 12,000 strategic nuclear warheads were poised to take out 200 million people – the Soviet Union and its allies, and the United States and its allies, as well as threatening the rest of the world with nuclear fallout ("Torn"). By 1986 there was a total of 40 to 50,000 nuclear weapons in the world – the sum of explosive power equivalent to three to five tons of TNT for every human on the planet (Dyer 2). Information that came to light after the end of the Cold War revealed that in late 1983 the world came closer to the brink of nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis ("Torn").

It can be argued that it was the arms build-up that caused the threat, or that the arms build-up allayed the threat – these were the two sides of the debate at the time. Nevertheless, the threat was felt in the form of fear – a politically repressive fear, used by governments to maintain political legitimacy, power and control.

Corey Robin writes of contemporary politically repressive fear in the United States – what he calls, “fear, American style” (163) – the elements of it symptoms of American political culture – and stemming in part from the fear of threats “…to physical security or moral well-being of the population, against which elites position themselves as protectors” (Robin 162). This linking of power with protection bolsters and intensifies elite rule, helps ensure that those with power maintain it, and induces populations to accommodate power, not to challenge it (Robin). Robin sees this contemporary US-style fear as not as a simple top-down approach or power-over by a ruling elite, but as “…an affair of collusion, involving the grunt work of collaborators, the cooperating of victims, and aid from those bystanders who do nothing to protest fear’s repressive hold” (163).

Australia was committed to supporting the US in its stand against the Soviets, linking itself to the US as an ally, and thus being under its protection. It demonstrated this by its support of US policies and the accommodation of US bases, as mentioned earlier. In 1980 the Fraser government approved the porting of US naval ships near Perth even though it knew at the time the move could increase the danger of a nuclear attack on Australia, as revealed by recently
released 1980 cabinet papers, justifying the risk as worth taking in order to bolster its status as an ally (Stewart 6). If the US was the big brother protector, Fraser was the local strongman, and although disliked for his private school-boy manner, was seen as unflinching and full of resolve, following his landslide victory after the sacking of the Whitlam government in November 1975. His spear-rattling and apocalyptic warnings saw the boosting of defence spending and Australian troop-readiness, and as well, contributed to the atmosphere of political fear in Australia at the time.

I remember a remnant of an earlier era. In 1978, in Toowoomba, in Queensland, a student household I regularly visited had a nuclear fallout shelter in the backyard, built during the Cold War 50s. Above-ground a wooden, tin-roofed structure, reminiscent of an outdoor dunny, sheltered a trapdoor and steps that led down to a narrow, cellar-like room. Hardly room to swing a cat, let alone shelter a family from nuclear fallout. The student household used it to store a few bottles of wine.

Much has been written of the Cold War of the 1950s, characterised by McCarthyist repression, of propaganda in the form of popular culture, safety documentaries, civil defence propaganda. This type of fear-inducing propaganda had disappeared by the 1980s. In the ‘80s a point of criticality had been reached – a climax. I would pinpoint the climax in 1983. There was no obvious battlefield. War had been fought in the backwaters, in US support for rightwing regimes of small South American countries, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Granada, East Timor. The walls of missiles had risen to a point where any small sound could set off a hair-trigger response. A finger twitched above a trigger, while two dogs circled with hackles raised. Protest reached its climax – masses surged in the streets; voices spoke out – battles of words were fought, in the media, on television.

It didn’t happen. The button wasn’t pressed. In 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the Cold War era. Nuclear power became domesticated, seen as a cleaner alternative to coal. The Olympic Dam uranium mine at Roxby Downs is expected to begin a huge, five billion dollar expansion next year,
tripling its uranium production, provided it obtains federal and state government approvals ("Optimism"). BHP also plans to develop the $17 billion Yeelirrie mine in Western Australia, which will increase Australian uranium exports by up to 50 percent, when operating at its peak (Chambers 1).

Today, however, risks associated with nuclear power and proliferation are just as real – possibly more so. At the time of writing Japan is desperately trying to cool down its crippled Fukushima nuclear plant, following the March 2011 earthquake and Tsunami.4 While there’s been a number of non-proliferation treaties in countries such as the US and the former Soviet Union, which has led to the non-deployment of nuclear weapons, there is growing evidence that so-called ‘rogue’ states such as North Korea, Pakistan and Iraq are engaging in a nuclear arms build-up to disquieting proportions. Indeed, there’s mounting evidence that Israel and China as well, are building up their nuclear weaponry ("Post-Cold War Nuclear Policy Study Questions").

However, nuclear issues are not central to today’s public fear, as they were during the Cold War era. Bush’s “war on terror” took centre stage, (and included the fear that terrorists could gain control of nuclear weapons) although increasingly today, climates of insecurity release free-floating anxieties that underly capitalism (Politics 24). Anxiety is generated by the proliferation of choices of products, media headlines warning of disease and disasters. This ambient anxiety may give way to objectless fears, an anticipation of danger even when there’s no identifiable threat. Angel and Gibbs discuss that these anxieties are magnified because there is no identifiable frightening object to attach them to, and that leaders seen as strong or fatherly such as former Prime Minister John Howard are expert at finding a locus for anxiety, for example asylum seekers and the ‘children overboard’ scenario (Angel and Gibbs 33).

4 Media reports are warning that leaking radiation could be blown across the Pacific to the US and parts of Europe. Widespread panic buying of iodine tablets is occurring, from as far away from the disaster area as America and Finland. Troy Jones, president of nukepills.com in Mooresville, N.C., said he had sold 6,500 orders of iodine pills with most of the orders coming from customers in Washington State, Oregon and California who want protection from any Japanese radiation.
It was no longer the 1950s, yet the ‘80s Cold War atmosphere of fear permeated outwards, through the domestic front, seeped into everyday lives. It had a double message. Concomitant with the threat of nuclear war was an invitation to trust in our government, and in the United States – the Super Power we needed to protect us. The US arms race strategy was necessary to keep us safe.

In the 1980s those who protested against nuclear arms or anything else against the interests of the state were labelled “reds” or “commos”. Political organisations such as the Communist Party of Australia, and other Socialist or Left-Wing parties or groups, or members of environmental and feminist movements were under surveillance by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and state police Special Branches. The Aarons family, for example, prominent Communist Party of Australia members, and revolutionary socialists for four generations, were under intense security surveillance by ASIO until the mid-1980s, resulting in 209 volumes of ASIO – generated files, photographs, films and tapes (Aarons xi). Aarons estimates that by the 1960s between ten and twenty percent of the Communist Party membership was made up of secret ASIO plants (x). The recent release of ASIO files has revealed that much of the intelligence gathered concerned activities such as opposing racism, campaigning for the environment and fighting through Union branches for better working conditions (Aarons xi).

On a very different band of the political spectrum, members of the Ananda Marga (AM), an Eastern spiritual organisation which includes a revolutionary arm, known as Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT), were labelled Australia’s first terrorists. In 1978 a bomb blast outside the Sydney Hilton Hotel, which was hosting a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting attended by the Indian Prime Minister, Desai, killed two council workers and a policeman and wounded seven others. Shortly afterwards Ananda Marga members were arrested by NSW police and accused of conspiring to bomb the home of the leader of rightwing racist organisation, The National Front, Robert Cameron, (known as ‘The Skull’, for his cadaver-like appearance and bald head).
In the 1982 inquest into the Hilton bombing (unusually held four years after the event), the Coroner found a prima facie case against AM members Alister and Dunn – and not Anderson, but the Attorney General decided not to proceed, and the charges were dropped. Alister, Dunn and Anderson were subsequently convicted of conspiracy to murder Cameron, and each was sentenced to 16 years jail. After serving six years of their sentence, the three were pardoned after a judicial inquiry cast doubt on the evidence of the key witness, Richard Seary, a police informer (Humphries 1). Each of the three was awarded $100,000 following his release in 1985 (Freeman 49).

In 1989 Tim Anderson was re-arrested and charged with the Hilton bombing, based on a statement by Raymond Denning, a notorious criminal, that Anderson had confessed to him in jail. The day after, Evan Pederick, a member of AM at the time of the bombing, confessed to planting the bomb, and implicated Anderson in planning the event (Fife-Yeomans 9). Evan Pederick was sentenced to 20 years jail on three counts of murder and one of conspiracy. In 1991 the NSW Court of Criminal Appeal quashed Anderson’s conviction. Pederick’s evidence was discredited, and he was released from jail in 1997, after serving eight years of a 20 year sentence. Anderson appealed and was finally acquitted in 1991.  

Anecdotally, activists involved in protest movements during the Cold War era, including during the 1980s, experienced surveillance tactics such as being

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5 The Sydney Hilton bombing remains an unsolved mystery. The 1982 inquest was fuelled by suspicions about AM. Indian Prime Minister Desai had accused AM of the bombing, believing the organisation was behind death threats he’d received. AM had been under surveillance by ASIO – and documents released in 2008 by the National Archives in Canberra suggested ASIO suspected that the PROUTist wing of AM was behind violent actions against Indian officials in Australia in 1977 (Humphries 1). Theories abound in relation to the Hilton case – too lengthy to go into here – but due to odd inconsistencies in the police investigation, and slack security arrangements at the CHOGM site, many at the time, including Terry Griffiths, one of the policemen injured by the explosion suspected that the bomb may have been planted by security forces in an attempt to secure more funds. (Following the bombing came increased support for the anti-terrorism activities of intelligence services – ASIO and Special Branch were given increased finances and greater powers) (Freeman 49).
followed, having their telephones tapped, and being photographed and filmed, as a part of life. Protest organisations expected that secret ASIO ‘plants’ had infiltrated and were present at meetings, gatherings and rallies. Being photographed by plainclothes police at protest rallies was “par for the course”.

Although protesters were from all different professions, of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds – they were typically labelled by the media as “Reds” or “commos”, as unemployed, as “professional protesters” and, although some media were sympathetic, were often ridiculed and vilified in the media.

What evidence is there that an ‘epidemic of fear’ of nuclear war existed in the early 1980s? Little serious research was carried out in the eighties concerning the prevalence of fear or effects of fear of nuclear war (Dyer 3). A Gallup poll published in January 1985 found that 48 percent of British teenagers believed that nuclear war was likely and that most believed themselves unlikely to survive it (Dyer 3). A survey of Australian primary school children aged between ten and twelve years old, conducted by the Medical Association for Prevention of War in 1983 and reported in the media, found that of 170 children interviewed, 78 percent expected the world to be destroyed within 15 years and 48 percent believed they would not live to have a family (Chidiac 3). The children’s comments included, “I can’t see myself as having any future in this society,” and, “I think I would prefer to kill myself than grow up in the world” (Chidiac 3).

The growing numbers at mass protests in the West and in Europe during the early 1980s is further evidence of fear and concern. Millions demonstrated in the streets and in front of NATO military bases in Europe following Reagan’s 1981 statements about a “winnable” limited nuclear war. Waves of protests in Germany climaxed during federal elections in March 1983, when an estimated two to four million people rallied in German cities against the US deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe (Mushaben 32). A women’s peace camp was set up in 1981 outside the US Air Base at Greenham Common near Newbury in Britain, and lasted for over a decade, its actions culminating in the encirclement of the base by 35,000 women, temporarily shutting it down. Australian protests, such
as the Women’s Peace Camp at Pine Gap near Alice Springs, were part of the
growing global movement, synchronising their actions to northern hemisphere
peace campaigns.

“Nuclear war is undoubtedly the most serious issue the global family has ever
had to face”, Patrick White told the silent crowd of 40,000 people at Circular
Quay in March 1982. One hundred thousand people across Australia rallied
against nuclear weapons on that day – it was the biggest demonstration since the
Vietnam moratorium – Australia had joined the global family. I was one among
them, in the pouring rain, the march so long that people were still leaving
Circular Quay thirty minutes after the head of the march reached Hyde Park a
mile away. Protest marches such as this one, and White’s words, helped people
gain a sense of solidarity in the face of the greatest threat of all time.

My politicisation had begun years earlier in Queensland. It had galvanised
during my time in “down and out” St Kilda, and had found an outlet in social and
political movements of the early 80s. I found friends and a sense of belonging I
had not felt before. Thinking about experiences of protest from my own life, as
well as revisiting the ambient fear of the early 1980s and gaining a sense of the
political atmosphere of the time, was necessary to writing 1983, as this
atmosphere is the background of the novel – the time and space of the characters.
2. The Noise in the Background

As an aid to memory, and to “breathe the air”, I visited St Kilda in 2006 and 2007, whilst I was writing the novel. It has changed, of course, since the early 1980s. Gentrified, ‘cleaned up,’ St Kilda smells of money. Its decadence still exists, but is more controlled; street sex work is regulated, confined to certain areas and times. Outdoor dining is the trend – restaurants spill out onto streets packed with laughing, chatting people. Art galleries proliferate – rather than ‘workshops’, it is bourgeois now, not bohemian.

St Kilda remains a pleasure palace, as it was in its European beginnings, when the schooner, *The Lady of St Kilda* was anchored in the bay. I walk the streets on a Friday night. Fitzroy Street and Acland Street are thick with young revellers. Knots of people, many of them young tourists and backpackers, congregate outside the pubs, singing, carousing. Later they stumble up and down the strip, these groups of excited young people. And later still, it’s all one can do to dodge the technicolour yawns.

As I walk around St Kilda I begin to think of the city as an entity, a system, an organisation of affect. In *The Four-Gated City* Lessing writes of the city as a slow moving organism, the buildings bombed out by the war revealing layer after layer of wallpaper – each layer an affective expression of lives lived within (Lessing 87).

In *1983* I imagine the city’s softness – how the characters’ emotions, their very selves are expressed in the living city; are parts of that city. How the city itself is in continual conversation – feeding back and reflecting the characters’ affects. As I was writing the novel, I undertook to gain some understanding of affect theory and affect contagion, because I thought that these ideas correlated with some of the novel’s emerging themes – such as the spread of fear and other affects, political activism and collective identity – and stemming from these – affective bonds.
Cities can be seen as roiling maelstroms of affect. Particular affects like anger, fear, joy, shame, are continually on the boil, rising here, subsiding there, and these affects continually manifest themselves in events which can take place either at a grand scale or simply as part of the continuing everyday life of cities. (Thrift "Affective Cities" 1)

In our Australian urban environments these affects may be the surge and excitement of a crowd welcoming home athletes or war heroes, or the mobs at Cronulla boiling round and beating up those they think are Muslims. Or they could be the sound of a city beach in summer, a happy sound of slapping waves and children squealing in the surf, or drunken party-goers, unseen in the dark, making their way home past terrace balconies. The city is an aggregation of affective states.

Even in the novel’s time-frame, the 1980s, the mainstream media is pervasive, its chatter, its tv flicker is the background noise, a soundtrack of anxiety in the characters’ lives. Newspaper headlines shriek from street corners, “Millions can survive a nuclear war” (Terry 5) or “Winged attack could finish off N-victims”(AAP 7).

This is the noise in the background, the pervasive, anxiety-producing media, and the sounds of protest, an intermingling of both. The impact of words, felt in the body, and flowing from this, the strong affects.

In this chapter I will briefly look at some theories of affect and affect contagion and from these, via conversations with a scientist colleague, move into the sphere of bio-physics, to develop a way of understanding how contagion works, how feelings and ideas are spread.

There is no fixed or established definition of “affect”. A range of different notions or ideas of affect exist in contemporary humanities and cultural studies. Major theories include the Spinoza-Deleuzian approach, in which “affect is the capacity for interaction that is akin to a natural force or emergence” (Thrift
"Intensities" 64). Massumi writes that affect’s autonomy is “…its openness” (Parables 35). “Affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them…Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (Parables 35). (This theory operates in one sense on a very general level, and is therefore not necessarily useful for either social analysis or novel writing.)

The American psychologist Silvan Tomkins argued that psychological affect is innate, and inseparable from the neurophysiology of the human body (Tomkins qtd in Gibbs “Contagious Feelings”). Tomkins’s theories deal with subjectivity – the stuff of novels. To adherents of Tomkins’s theories of affect, the affect system is a complex system, and is the primary motivational system in human beings (Frank and Kosofsky Sedgwick 36). The affect system is connected to, yet independent of the organism’s internal systems such as the receptor, analytical, storage and motor mechanisms. It is subject to a broad range of challenges, demands and opportunities in the environment in which it operates (Frank and Kosofsky Sedgwick 37).

Tomkins posited a constellation of six paired affective states: fear-terror, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, distress-anguish, interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, as well as two additional affects which have evolved to monitor the drive of hunger – dismell (response to a bad odour) and disgust (The Silvan Tomkins Institute). For Tomkins, the face is the chief site of affect (Thrift "Intensities" 61). Each discrete affect correlates to a common facial expression, for example, fear-terror indicates the expression of “eyes frozen open, pale, cold, sweaty, facial trembling, with hair erect” (Frank and Kosofsky Sedgwick).

Affects manifest on the face and in the voice, expressions we may or may not struggle to control. Tomkins writes, “affects are not private obscure internal intestinal responses but facial responses that communicate and motivate at once both publicly outward to the other and backward and inward to the one who smiles or cries or frowns or sneers or otherwise expresses his affects” (7).

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6 In the above paired affects, the first indicates the affect at low intensity, and the second at high intensity.
The contagion of human expression is intrinsic to communication. Smiles and yawns are “caught” and responded to. I smile at a Muslim woman in a burkha and she smiles back with her eyes. I yawn and you yawn. I yawn at my dog and he yawns back.

More recent research on affect and expression has identified “micro expressions”, which are typically intense expressions lasting for only about 1/15th of a second or less, which occur when we attempt to conceal our emotions, either deliberately or unintentionally (Ekman 5). Psychology professor Paul Ekman writes that most people don’t recognise these expressions, although it is possible to learn – which may be useful for policing and professions where identifying lies is helpful (5). Current understanding of newborn development indicates that babies can “read” subtle facial expressions ("Your Baby Is Reading Your Face" 2010). I wonder if we do also ‘feel’ and ‘catch’ these fleeting expressions during interactions even though we may not actually consciously ‘notice’ them – they may subtly warn us that something is not quite right and feed back to our own affective states.

Tomkin’s view is derived largely from Darwin’s early research in The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (Gibbs "After Affect" 188), where expressions of emotion, typically involving the face or voice, were seen as universal, common to all cultures, shared to an extent by some animals, and to have been produced by evolution (Thrift "Intensities" 63). The view that emotional expression in humans is universal has been rejected widely over the last century in favour of cultural relativism. However, research in the 1960s, including Paul Ekman’s investigations of isolated New Guinea Hills tribes, established a commonality of facial expression between people, despite cultural differences (Ekman 4).

Most people try to mask or manage their expressions in public, however, and so learn ‘display rules’, which may be culturally variable. Eckman’s late sixties research into the managing of expression showed cultural differences in how emotions are masked. Japanese students, for example masked negative emotions
with positive expressions when watching unpleasant videos in the presence of authority figures, while American students did not (Ekman 4).

Anna Gibbs writes that both views (Spinoza-Deleuzian) and Tomkins, conceive of affect as “involved in the human autonomic system and engaging an energetic dimension that impels or inhibits the body’s capacities for action” (Gibbs "After Affect" 188), but that Tomkin’s theory allows the precise specification of each of the nine affects it identifies. Tomkin’s theory delineates:

…which affects are likely to be called up in response to which others and why, and a systems-oriented, nonteleological way of thinking human development as affective responses are patterned – or organised – by ongoing processes of script formation. (Gibbs "After Affect" 188)

Gibbs sees both above broad views of affect, although stemming from divergent philosophical hypotheses, as being "essential…in the overarching intellectual project of rethinking the human in the wake of a sustained critique of Western rationality” (Gibbs "After Affect" 188). Humans are not automatons: the centrality of affect is essential when writing about and thinking about human interactions, relationships, bonds and politics. It is affect that assists the spread of ideas, trends and beliefs throughout society. It is affect that facilitates a change in ideas – a reversal from one kind of feeling state to another, which can, via contagion, be enacted on a mass scale.

Affect contagion

Gibbs has written evocatively of the concept of the spread of affective states through human populations as a form of contagion, akin to epidemics produced by infective agents: “Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear…” (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings" 1).
In the early 1980s, fear’s public zeitgeist was the threat of nuclear war. The future was present, threatening, and the future threat was a fact. Governments justified the expansion of budgets to build a massive arsenal of nuclear weapons against an enemy, based on pre-emptive logic – to allay the future threat. Public opinion supported these strategies. Governments were re-elected, the status quo remained in place – until a shift came about – mass rallies against the arms race reached critical numbers, the Cold War tensions were dissipated, the wall came down.

Jackie Orr writes about time and its relation to terror, repeating itself. How in the 1950s, a terrifying future of atomic attack was “…imaginarily imploded into a tremulous present…” via Cold War popular culture, state-sponsored civil defence simulations and propaganda (279). And today, the “war on terror” is a theatre of threat, “…a terror-filled future-present productively performed in the blood-laced borderlands of psychic and political warfare” (Orr 280).

Today’s fear epidemics come and go with increasing rapidity, are spread and amplified by the media. Threats of exotic flu, pandemics, terrorist attacks, whether real or not, make headline news, whether anything happens or not. We say now, that news ‘goes viral’. Affect contagion via the new media, the internet, twitter, Facebook, You Tube, is so fast, it is almost instantaneous. (Do we look to a future where everyone in the world is a member of Facebook? Are those of us who have resisted, or are unresourced, the missing links in a vast network?)

In looking for a way forward in viewing contagion, Gibbs calls for the development of a new understanding of mimetic communication, not as simple visual copying, but “as a complex communicative process in which other sensory and affective modalities are centrally involved” (“After Affect” 191). Gibbs sees affect contagion as central to mimesis, where specific affects are rapidly and automatically transmitted from body to body (“After Affect” 191).

A person is drawn to what resonates with the affective states already experienced neurophysiologically. Fear propagates amongst individuals encoding a fear-
loaded affective structure as body memory. In theoretical terms, the phenomenon Tompkins has termed ‘affective resonance’ describes the amplification of affective states such that more of the same affect is evoked in both the person experiencing the affect and the observer (Tompkins qtd in Gibbs "Contagious Feelings" 3).

Tomkin’s view implies that affect brings with it particular attitudes and ideas associated with a person’s inner world (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings" 1). Gibbs writes that this is consistent with the work of somatic practitioners such as Feldenkrais and with contemporary neurobiology, the work of Antonio Damasio, for example (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings" 1). Although affect, as seen above, operates as a different system, it is associated with cognition, with sensory perception and with memory. For example, I smell a certain smell and this may evoke past memories associated with that smell. Along with the smell and the memory, particular feelings and associated ideas may also be conjured up.

Once, a long time ago, I was walking in the Sydney Botanical Gardens on a rainy Sunday, and came across a life-like stone or marble sculpture of a horse. The gardens were deserted, the rain was pouring, and I was taken aback by the strong smell of wet hide and hair as I approached the sculpture, despite the inert material it was made of. I touched the horse’s rain-washed flank and the smell remained, overpowering, evoking memories of a childhood spent amongst horses, feelings of sadness, and attitudes even, related to sadness and loss.

Anna Gibbs writes that “the mass media act as powerful amplifiers of affect” (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings" 1). Amplified and intensified voices and a concentrated focus on facial expressions in the media contribute to the heightening of affect (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings"). Gibbs speculates, using the example of political figure Pauline Hanson, that affect contagion, feelings passing from body to body through the intermediary of the media, in this case, television, may carry along certain associated ideas. She writes: “The media act as vectors in affective epidemics in which something else is also smuggled along: the attitudes and even the specific ideas which tend to accompany affect in any given situation” (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings"). The media was
fascinated with Pauline Hanson – her face took up the screen. Hanson’s distress in her expressions and her voice was palpable, a contagious affect, and attached to her distress, ideas – the idea of the curtailment of political freedom was communicated (Gibbs "Contagious Feelings" 4).

**Affect Contagion as a Small World Network**

It’s an Autumn morning in Faulconbridge, in the Blue Mountains. I stand out on the back veranda sipping my coffee and staring out at the garden. Rain has blanked out the hills on the next ridge, and drifts over intermittently. The white sky is ripped by the cries of cockatoos. There are smatterings of rain on the roof as cockies bluster in the heads of the drenched trees. When the sun comes out, every leaf glows. It’s mostly here that I’ve worked on the novel – far away in space and time from 1983, from the novel’s settings of cities and the desert and India. It’s also out here that I’ve had many conversations, sitting around the table and drinking Chinese tea or wine, talking with friends about long-ago days of activism, about being a part of a movement, or a cult, and what motivated us and held us together in that time.

Biophysicist Virginia Shepherd and I have been friends for a long time – more than twenty years – and she too had been involved in political activism in the 1980s. It was here, over the course of writing the novel, that we talked frequently about the kinds of movements we were a part of as networks, and about how thoughts and feelings are spread – and came to think about the correlation of ideas about Small World Network (SWN) theory and affect as a way forward in discussing the contagious nature of affect in the social process.

This section of the essay is based on conversations with Dr Shepherd ("Personal"), where recent concepts of networks are drawn from biophysics and mathematics:

VS: “When it’s said that affective states such as fear spread like wildfire, or that affect is contagious and has an epidemiology, it situates affect in amongst the phenomena that behave as small world networks (SWN). Steven Strogatz and
Duncan Watts have published landmark papers in Nature that sum up their seminal work on the nature of SMN ("Exploring"). Just how exciting this research is, is shown by the fact that each of these papers have over 10 thousand citations! This makes Watts and Strogatz a sort of small world network themselves”.

JS: “Networks seem to be permeating our thinking today in all sorts of areas and fields – from computer viruses to the spread of human viruses, to epidemics of fear, to fashions and trends. The NSW Ambulance Service was struck down by a computer virus on the weekend, and that made headline news. There’s a fear in society that it’s through the disruption of networks that future wars will be fought, that permeating these networks that we rely on so thoroughly is the way to bring societies to their knees. It also brings to mind the way we used to organise politically in the 1980s – the decision-making structures we had, of affinity groups and “spokes-meetings”, which were actually SWNs – although we didn’t call them that. And how today the internet, texting and twitter are tools activists now employ in protest and organisation.

“When I think of SWNs I think of the well-known example of the Kevin Bacon phenomenon, which led to the concept of ‘six degrees of separation”, in which every person on the planet is theoretically connected to every other by six steps. But I suspect that SWNs are more than that – they seem to be intrinsic to the way life is organised and the way people interact”.

VS: “Small-world networks seem to be inherent in the way living systems are organised. This brings us to the biological and philosophical question of what it means to be alive, to be a living system. Briefly we could say that a living system is one that reproduces itself, organises and maintains itself through networks of processes that regenerate themselves, such as the biochemistry of metabolism. The scientists Maturana and Varela called this autopoiesis. Also there exists a boundary between the living system and the environment, between self and not-self as immunologists say, and furthermore the latest literature
would add some level of cognitive ability or at least the ability to adapt to environmental change as a feature of living systems (Shepherd "Reflections").

Shepherd tells of a famous work by Jennings at the turn of the last century, where protozoans were fed pieces of carbon, which they ate and then rejected – and they would not be tempted a second time! Some Japanese researchers showed recently that the single-celled amoebae that collectively make up a slime mould are able to learn and remember, navigate mazes and solve simple puzzles (Saigusa).

“Living systems have a sort of hierarchical organisation such that they consist of levels of organisation nested within one another. For example a cell contains protein and metabolic networks, tissues and organs are made up from cells, whole organisms are made up from tissues and organs, clusters of organisms form ecologies and so on, as described in Miller and Miller’s Living Systems Theory (Miller).

Some of the living systems shown to be small-world networks include protein to protein interactions, gene regulation, the topology of metabolism, the nervous system, gossip networks, internet and peer group connectivity, and the structure of the English language - all behave as small world networks (Shepherd "Cytomatrix").

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7 A living system is able to harvest energy from the environment to maintain itself in a far-from equilibrium state. The scientist Schrödinger called this "negentropy". Shepherd adds to this list a capacity for memory, for the remembrance of things past. Lately that’s been proven to be true, even in plants (Shepherd “Reflections”).

8 Shepherd suggests that the similarities between superficially disparate phenomena (cellular metabolism, brain-states, earthquakes, cloud precipitation) can be interpreted within Miller and Miller’s Living Systems Theory, where living systems are embedded within one another on different hierarchic levels. This model identifies eight levels of living systems (cells, organs, organisms, groups, organisations, societies and supranational systems), to which she adds Gaian systems including clouds, earthquakes and evolution. The living systems evolved by a process Miller and Miller call ‘fray-out’ where higher level systems developed increasingly more complex components in each sub-system than those below them in the hierarchy - as in a ship’s cable, which is a single unit that can separate into the ropes that compose it. These in turn unravel into finer strands, strings and threads. Miller and Miller identify 20 critical sub-systems of living systems. These include subsystems that process matter and energy, those processing information, and those processing both (Miller).
“What is so exciting about a small world network, mathematically, is that it’s a kind of map of connectivity that falls in between perfectly ordered and perfectly random networks. Say you have a certain connection between some randomly selected people. A knows B, B knows C and so on. You call A, B and C “nodes” - they could be also be molecules that are part of a metabolic pathway. The network would have the same sort of “small-world” structure (Shepherd "Cytomatrix").

“The number of connections between these nodes increases as a logarithmic function of the number of nodes in the system. That means it is not a linear system. Once you have a power law like this all sorts of amazing things can happen – such as self-organisation, or critical behaviour, where the whole system might suddenly shift from one state to a radically different state with the connection of a single extra node. Also, because it’s a power law, the nodes can be highly clustered or clumped – to the point where you have what is known as a hub. A hub is a very well-connected node indeed – Strogatz and Watts themselves are a hub.

Also the network is extremely robust and resilient. You can knock out a lot of the connections with outlying nodes and the system maintains function. But if it loses a hub – the whole system collapses.”

JS: “When I think of a whole system suddenly shifting, I think of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, the Wall Street stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, the protest that ended Hosni Hubarak’s 30 year rule in Egypt, and the current ‘domino effect’ of rapid change in Egypt, Libya, and possibly other Middle Eastern countries. I wonder if it could be tracked, and mathematically predicted – the creation of a hub or a system’s sudden shift to another state – I guess it goes back to the actual anatomy of networks, which as Strogatz writes is now possible to probe because of powerful computers”("Exploring" 268), although Strogatz says they are difficult to understand due to structural complexities and network evolution – the World Wide Web, for example is in constant flux with pages and links created and lost continually ("Exploring" 268).
VS: The SWN is a radical idea because for a long time mathematicians only accepted the existence of networks that were ordered or random – that is, one where the nodes were very clustered and organised, like a crystal, but where the path lengths connecting them were long, or another where the nodes were randomly distributed, so that there was a short distance between them, but not much clustering. The startling thing about SWN is that they have a short path length as well as a lot of clustering. They have the best of both these worlds.

“Living systems also have built-in ‘noise’ or fluctuations. For example the healthy heart is ‘noisy’ rather than perfectly regular – in fact, if you have a perfectly regular heartbeat you probably have congestive heart failure. It’s the noise that endows the system with its robustness and also its creativity. Social networks such as gossip networks, internet and peer group connectivity, as well as systems as different as social conflict, aircraft transport pathways, the structure of languages, the internet, ecosystems, social networks, friendship and sex, develop network structures that are ‘noisy’ in that they are subject to self-organised criticality (Carbone et al). As Carbone et al put it, “…elementary social components – through their interaction – spontaneously develop collective behaviours that could not have been deduced on the basis of simple additivity” (Carbone et al 122).

JS: “Actor Network Theory (ANT) is a sociological approach that is concerned with power and organisation as effects of networks (Law 381). It views institutions and systems including the family, computing systems, the economy and technology as “ordered networks of heterogeneous materials whose resistance has been overcome” (Law 381). In ‘heterogeneous materials’ it includes the non-human – machines, furniture, texts, buildings, clothes and animals as well as human elements among the materials that make up networks, because it views all our interactions with other people as “mediated through

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9 It has been widely argued that the frequencies of fluctuations in systems subject to self-organised criticality can be mathematically described by a dimension called 1/f noise, ‘flicker’ or pink noise. This has a power-law fractal structure that appears to be widespread in living systems. For example the healthy human heartbeat has a 1/f spectrum. Pink noise fluctuations in fossil data suggests that there are long-range correlations between extinction events.
objects of one kind or another” (italics not mine) (Law 381). ANT sees social
agents as never just located in bodies alone but rather as an actor – a patterned
network of heterogeneous relations – an actor is always also a network. Can you
see correlations between ANT and SWN – in that SWN proposes the bio-
physical basis for such network structures?”

VS: “From what you’re saying this is another formulation of network theory and
it reminds me of process philosophy, especially some of the ideas of A.N.
Whitehead in that it’s stating that nothing exists on its own, everything is part of
a system of systems (Shepherd "Reflections"). There are no things as such, only
relationships. All the evidence seems to suggest that living systems are
organised around small world network mathematics, with those qualities of
robustness, connectivity and speedy information transfer. So the ANTs would
also be small-world networks mathematically. Interestingly they include the
non-living products of living systems as part of the system. This seems very
important. What would a chair mean to anything other than a human being?
The chair isn’t alive as such but it is the meaningful creation of a living system
and it has meaning to that system – it is in effect a mode of communication and it
couldn’t have formed in any way other than through a living agency.”

JS: “Chairs mean a lot to dogs.”

VS: “Yes. Ha ha. You could take ANT down to the amoeba level in some
senses – take it down to the cellular level. There are amoebae that build these
incredible beautiful flasks in which they live – build them piece by piece.10

“Even bacteria do this thing called “quorum sensing”, a term stolen from
management theory, but in this process the bacteria make decisions in
relationship to the decisions of other bacteria and then the cohort of bacteria
collectively solve problems. So possibly ANT applies to living systems in

10 In the 19th century a scientist called Verworn famously gave them coloured glass particles and
observed the process of construction of this flask. It wasn’t just a practical sort of home so
painstakingly constructed but some of them had beautiful spines from which the pseudopodia or
false feet project and I think we might assume these are meaningful constructions if you are an
amoeba. Once again you have some inanimate materials assembled by a living system in a
meaningful way. So I guess you could take ANT down to the amoeba level in some senses.
general, and as I’ve said, I would argue that its very likely that living systems use small world type networking as a rule.

JS: “Getting to the heart of the matter – if information can spread contagiously via SWNs, then why not feelings? As far as I know, affect contagion hasn’t yet been linked theoretically to SMN, so it’s a completely new idea.”

VS: “Affects - joy, fear, terror and so on, if we consider these as transmissible information, can easily spread. You could say that SWNS have in-built contagion. It has been shown mathematically that a small-world network has “enhanced signal propagation speed, computational power and synchronisability” (Watts and Strogatz 440). That is, the clustering and short path lengths encourage the spreading of information, very quickly or even instantaneously, between clusters of nodes. In fact, it (SWN) has probably evolved that way because such networks are characteristic of living systems.

JS: “So could it be that’s what’s happening when a collection of individuals becomes like one – the aerial formations of a flock of swallows, or a school of garfish, acting as one body, the imperceptible creeping forward of a slime mould, or a crowd of people, behaving like one large synchronised system - the individuals all flowing together, and experiencing the same affects – becoming a violent mob, or terrified, excited or joyful.”

VS: “The connectivity between neighbours or nodes in such a structure can increase slowly until a critical number of links are made. At this critical point, all nodes are suddenly and dramatically connected - this is ‘sync’. As we said earlier, SWNs seem characteristic of living systems. Such SWN systems are non-linear – they can have a fractal dimension, which means they may be self-similar at any level of scale. It has been shown that sub-cellular architecture follows such a fractal design, as do cities built on medieval sub-structures (like Prague, for example) (Shepherd "Cytomatrix"). We could say that living systems such as cells, or extending the idea, social systems, are dynamically critical or situated on the edge of chaos, on the edge of sync. A system that’s critically dynamic can maximise the synchronised behaviour of its parts even
when there are many many parts. Living systems that are far from thermodynamic equilibrium, self-organise.

“Cognition itself has been linked to neural synchrony. During an act of cognition, billions of neurons can suddenly fire in lockstep and form a collective electrical oscillation, more coherent than the individual firings that preceded it.

“Neural synchrony has also been linked to the formation of memory – cognitive functions depend on how assemblies of neurons fire in time. The synchronization of neuron action potentials firing in the gamma frequency range (around 30 – 100 Hz) seems to be involved in the formation of long term memory (Axmacher et al). In fact, Strogatz wrote that “…synchronised neural activity is consistently associated with…cognition, memory and perception…” (Sync 279). Patterns of brain wave activity correspond to fractal power-law distributions (Thurner et al.), so it’s possible to surmise then, that the brain is a small world network capable of critical (synchronisation) behaviour.

“Violent social conflicts and terrorist attacks have been found to show power law distributions and self-organised criticality, similar to the spread of infection and the immune response of a human body. The critical variable was an affective quality the author called “willingness to use force” (Wiegel 163).

JS: “As discussed earlier in this essay, Tomkins viewed affects not as private and internal but communicating outwardly to others and responding to the expression of others’ affects (7). Gibbs writes of affect contagion as an involuntary mimicry, where smiles and yawns are ‘caught’, feelings leap from body to body. What then is the underlying nature of the signal that passes between human individuals and enables synchronisation as affective contagion? What underlies Darwin’s famous analysis of facial expression? What is the neurophysiological correlate to affect contagion?”

VS: “Recent research has demonstrated the presence of so-called mirror neurons - a class of neurons found in the premotor cortex (Iacoboni et al.). When one performs an action and someone is watching, the areas of their brain that
correspond to that action are also activated. Even the sound of an action performed in the dark activates these neurons. Dysfunction in mirror neurons has been implicated in the communication difficulties experienced by persons with autism spectrum disorder. Interesting enough - but now it has been shown that it is not simply the perception of an action that activates these mirror neurons but the perception of the intentions of another” (Iacoboni et al.).

JS: “This then is another direct neurophysiological correlate for ‘sync’, as it relates to affect contagion! There are huge implications then for the contagion of affect via electronic media, as well as other areas of life.”

Returning to Gibb’s analogy of contagious affect resembling the spread of wildfire, we, Shepherd and Skelton, note that forest fires also satisfy 1/f self-organised criticality and percolation dynamics (Turcotte 1401), and argue that affective contagion may well follow similar models. That is, we would expect that such affect would spread through human networks with a critical point, or number of connections, signifying a sudden and global affective infection.

Ideas about SWNs and affect, while not explicit in the 1983, helped stimulate the making of the creative work. SWNs as maps of connectivity contribute to ideas about belonging and place, and affective bonds between members of groups, one of the preoccupations of the novel. The biophysics of sudden changes or collapses in systems adds to an understanding of political systems and to our experiences within them. The experience of merging, becoming a part of a synchronised group is explored in the novel, for example the (possibly imagined) orgy in the warehouse, and Frank-Govinda’s life in Ananda Marga, involvement in the DMC and vision of the dancing Avadhuts. The experience of a group or crowd becoming one entity is paradoxical - on one hand liberation is gained, and on the other, individual freedom is lost. Thoughts about affective bonds in groups and affect contagion are explored later in this essay.
Use of Affect by social and political movements

I remember so vividly the actions at Roxby Downs, the cavalcades of decorated vehicles, singing, dancing, street theatre, spirited marches with placards and banners, children’s marches, protests at the mine gates including women binding themselves to the gates in a paper web, protesters blockading the mine road by sitting in front of busloads of miners, all enacted in the desert, against red dunes, in hot winds, under azure skies. All designed to create a visual display, an emotional response.

Writing about protest in the 80s brings to mind the way that politics is changing — away from the traditional channels such as the labour movement and mass branch parties toward what Thrift calls a ‘politics of choice’, social movements such as environmental politics, animal rights, and anti-abortion groups or groups such as today’s protest organisations (e.g. NoWar or Get Up!). Young people interested in politics and activism are increasingly more likely to be involved in issues-based and online organisations rather than in established political parties (Hare 15). Thrift writes that these changes have re-defined what counts as political, and has allowed more room for an increasingly visible element of the political, for explicitly affective appeals, heavily dependent on the media ("Affective Cities" 10).

When did these changes in politics begin? Was it in the sixties with the Vietnam war, where millions were mobilised around a common cause? Then in the 70s and 1980s a growing environmental movement combined concerns of environmental degradation with the wider picture of national and global politics, and the Cold War machinations of the Superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union. Feminists, environmentalists, people who were aligned to parties or not, people who had never protested before, joined together in mass actions which took the form of street rallies, marches, and blockades of specific sites. In Australia, protests included the blockades of the Olympic Dam uranium mine at Roxby Downs, South Australia, in 1983 and 84, the Pine Gap Women’s Peace camp in Central Australia in 1983, and protests and vigils at US military bases around the country, and against visiting nuclear warships. On Palm Sunday
1982, an estimated 100,000 Australians participated in anti-nuclear rallies around the country. Towards the end of 1983, when the nuclear threat was hotting up, with the US flying Pershing 11 missiles to bases in West Germany, mass peace rallies in Australia were attended by up to half a million people, and occurred in conjunction with mass rallies in Europe.

Although many actions were spontaneous, even in the 1980s in Australia protests were often choreographed to the media’s cameras. Whilst affect is exploited in the media by the rich and powerful, small political movements such as those described in the creative component of this work, 1983, also utilised affect to their advantage, in their attempts to influence and use the mainstream media, in their own media, and in the affective bonds which kept them together as a group. Affect was employed, consciously or unconsciously, to arouse sympathy for the cause, and to recruit and retain members, and as well, in non-violent action to appeal to the sympathies of those on the ‘opposite side’ – for example, police or miners.

Idea: Affect flows on all sides of the protest action scenario and involves all actors – protesters, police, media and audience.

Examples abound of police being ‘affected’ in descriptions of protests, and not always to anger. Ann Petitt writes about the ‘Women for Life on Earth’ march to Greenham Common in 1981 - how by the second half of the long walk the police relaxed “…became human and danced with us to the tune of No More Hiroshimas…” (Pettitt 1). Marty Branagan writes that after the Roxby blockade of 1983, a policeman told him he couldn’t get that “damned song” (one of the protest songs) out of his head for weeks (p. 2). Margaret Somerville writes of the tears in the eyes of the policewomen in the lines at Pine Gap, as protesters face them sadly singing Holly Near’s famous anthem, “we are gentle angry women, and we are singing for our lives” (34).

This is affect contagion in action – affects such as interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy are ‘caught’ by others in the protest scenario, including police, and workers such as miners or forestry workers in the case of environmental protests.
In the Movement Against Uranium Mining (MAUM) archive at the Baillieu Library, I found a memorandum issued in 1983 to all Olympic Dam personnel from the mine manager. It asked that Olympic Dam workers stay away from the “greenies” camp, as it’s causing a split in the community. The writer said there’s a small element who persist in associating with “these people”, and he was shocked to learn that some mine workers were even having music lessons from the “greenies”.

I was at Roxby in 1984, the second year of protest. Hitchhiking to Woomera (we do silly things when we are young) I was picked up by a uranium miner, who took me beyond the fence and into the mine property, the miners’ village, closed off to protesters and heavily guarded. Travelling across the desert, I argued with him about the issues:

“It’s all bullshit,” he was saying. “You’ll never stop it, never. Those hippies out there. Barefoot, rolled in red dirt. No water to wash with and they probably like that. They try to tell you you will die. Bullshit.

Blokes come up from the city, check the radiation. You know, once I saw a greenie stake a flag on a tailings dump. Couldn’t believe it. No way would miners touch that stuff, and here was this long-haired jerk…”

“You do not recognise our right to protest.”

“You have no right to take my job.”

She turned from him, looked out the window. A hawk glided its circuit of sky. She wished she was free of the hard and tankish car, and this man, a uranium miner, who was determined to give her an ear-bashing, as he drove the long dirt road that crossed the plain of stones.

(Skelton "Fence" 93)
The miner, Ron, took me behind enemy lines, to his demountable home where I met his wife and daughter, and to the miner’s club where I was introduced to his mates. Police everywhere. The special ‘Star Force’ squad, mounted on their grey horses, performed exercises in the open areas around the buildings. The club was large, sprawling, as I remember, with a long bar, lounges and pool tables. It was crawling with police. As I sat at the bar, chain-smoking from nervousness and fatigue, I remember a police woman staring at me intently, but finally looking away. I looked different to the other women, with their make-up, their bleached or dyed hair and frocks. I sat with the men drinking beer. Ron told them I was his niece.

Ron was fascinated by the protesters. He’d been out to the protest camp and talked a lot with the ‘greenies.’ A mob of protesters had stayed on after the 1983 blockade – the ‘vigil’ people. This group had continued to camp near the mine to keep an eye on things such as waste removal and water quality. On one hand Ron talked as though he hated the greenies and everything they were on about. He and his wife slagged the greenies off for living out in the desert and not washing. But it seemed to me his harsh words masked an interest, and even a respect. But above all, Ron was a larrikin, a wag. He was enjoying the fact that he’d smuggled a greenie onto mine property under the noses of security guards and police. If he was found out he could’ve lost his job.

Off we went again, in Ron’s stationwagon, this time with a one-legged mate in tow – off to Andamooka, headed for another watering hole. But I wanted to get out, to get dropped off this time at the protest camp. Ron was unwilling to stop in case he was seen by the guards. I felt like a prisoner, and it was only with a lot of persuasion that I got him to drop me off. My pack was bundled out of the boot, under the incredulous gaze of the one-legged miner, who still wasn’t sure what was going on. This story illustrates the blurriness in demarcations between people, between the opposing camps. And this is what I wanted to convey in the novel – we are all human, we are all affective. I wanted to avoid writing a didactic diatribe – but rather show things more subtly – through characters’ affects and emotions. In the section about the Roxby protest, for example, the
miner’s thoughts are about water, symbolic of emotion, and the green, river country of his past.

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The protest action at Roxby Downs was one of the most emotionally charged episodes of my life. This is not to say that reason was absent.

James Jasper writes: “As an integral part of all social action, affective and reactive emotions enter into protest activities at every stage” (404). Jasper points out that this doesn’t mean protesters are irrational, but that “…even the most fleeting emotions are firmly rooted in moral and cognitive beliefs that are relatively stable and predictable…most emotions, far from subverting our goal attainment, help us define our goals and motivate action toward them” (402).

Affect does not take away from rationality or rational thinking; rather, it aids rationality. Affect is part of experience and out of experience flows learning. Passion drives us to experimentation, to creativity, trial and error – which is why cybernetics scientists are studying affect and attempting to incorporate emotions in developing the robot brain (Arbib 554). “Out of the marriage of reason with affect there issues clarity with passion. Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind” (Frank and Kosofsky Sedgwick 37).

An action at Roxby outside the mine gates is described by a protestor:

…fifty women circled on the road where it blocked approach to the parking space in front of the shaft gate. Here they sang and danced until the approach of police and shift cars and buses. They then wove themselves into a web lying with head inwards in a wide circle. They sang, “we are the women, we are the web, we are the flow, we are the ebb.”
Meanwhile blockaders were assembling in front of the main shaft gate, chanting the Dead March of Saul, and standing in front of police horses lined up against the gate and fence. Jules was out of his wheelchair and being carried on a person’s back. This person had a black blindfold. They approached the police line to the chant of “all we are saying, is close Roxby Downs.” Then began a most touching dialogue to which the people were listening intently.

“My back is weary. My back is weary but my spirit is strong.”

“Go forward, brother,” said Jules.

“Brother Jules, I see the servant of death awaiting us beyond.”

“Where is death?”

“It is all around us.”

So the dialogue went on to a wail and drum beat, until the two mimed the act of dying. This happened to the singing of Hallelujah Chorus which changed to Maralinga, Maralinga. So the singing, acting and chatter continued under the hot desert sun in the dusty square under the shadow of the uranium mine. (MAUM 7)

The protest actions described above incorporate diverse activities which employ affect, including singing and dancing, chanting, dialogue about death, wailing, a lone drum-beat, silence, and the evoking of Maralinga. The use of the Death March of Saul and the imitation of a solemn funeral procession is infused with affect.
The women weaving themselves into a web and their chant is both a claiming and transformation of space as well as a dramatization of the idea that humanity is integral to the cycle of nature – the flow, the ebb - if you kill nature you kill us all.

The street theatre with its “touching” dialogue, a man with a disability being carried on the back of a blindfolded man evokes the will of the human spirit to survive – but the spectre of Maralinga reminds us that in the nuclear scenario there is no survival, only death – of nature, the planet, everything.

The arts – visual, music and street theatre – assisted the philosophy of non-violence adopted by many organisations involved in these protest movements. The protest events described above are a good example of what Branagan calls “multiple foci of attention.” The action is decentralised through an array of activities, such as street theatre and clowning going on simultaneously (3). Rather than creating one focus, such as a mob shaking a gate, the actions are dispersed and therefore less confrontational, as well as being harder for authorities to control. In the above actions, the women lying on the ground in a ‘web’ formation caused a distraction while other protesters stood in front of the mine gates, blocking them from in-coming buses transporting workers to the mine.

Artist Zanny Begg ignores early 1980s activism when she alludes to counter-globalisation demonstrations in the nineties employing carnival as an expression of subversion, as something new happening in politics (49). Certainly in the 80s Labour Day marches, Peace marches, International Women’s Day and other demonstrations did take the often dreary form of people streaming up the street marching behind banners. But concurrently, 1980s protest actions emerging from the non-aligned environmental and women’s movements, such the peace camps at Greenham Common and Pine Gap, as well as the Roxby blockades, employed aspects of carnival. Activists used humour and creativity to transform spaces – made way for new realities to emerge, as well as providing protesters with tactical advantages. Although dealing with frightening threats such as that
of nuclear holocaust, carnival allowed protesters a space for fun – for bonding, and for positive affects to emerge, such as joy. Affect is intrinsic to carnival.

Margaret Somerville writes of the 1983 Pine Gap Women’s Peace camp as being like Carnival, “an antistructure, a temporary abandonment of meaning” (22). She refers to Turner’s description of Carnival as “a transitional phase in which differences of (pre-Carnival) status are annulled with the aim of creating among the participants a relationship of communitas” (Turner, qtd in Somerville 22). Somerville saw the Pine Gap camp as a place of different tensions, of contradictions due to the complexity of individuals present – yet all were participating in a common experience (22).

At Pine Gap women of various backgrounds, ages, and sexualities transformed the area around the US base through actions such as decorating and weaving the fences and gates with streamers, ribbons, flowers, threads, photographs, slogans and brightly painted cloth banners. As Alison Bartlett points out, the Pine Gap
Participants in the protest carried out civil disobedience actions from defacing public signs to breaking through the fence around the base and getting arrested. Actions included dismantling the gates to the fence via a push-pull struggle with police, and then carrying them off in a symbolic and solemn procession, and returning with them garlanded and woven with native flowers and grasses. In a spontaneous action, 111 arrested women on November 11 all gave their names as American activist Karen Silkwood. This is significant in terms of mimesis – it was an example of a viral idea spreading through a network of activists and resulting in a successful action.

As Somerville discusses, the Pine Gap participants were a community of diverse women who joined together “to make an alternative set of spatial practices visible in the landscape” (30). Desert land, the traditional lands of the Pitjantjatjara people, changed and imposed upon by colonisation and the erection of a foreign spy base, was transformed, if temporarily, into a women-only space, which Somerville says “opened up a space of possibilities, a liminal space, which continued for many of us for many years” (43). Anecdotally, many women’s lives were transformed through their involvement in Pine Gap – changes came about for women involving careers, life directions, and sexualities. Stories abound of women going wild at Pine Gap - some women partied, were loud and disorderly. Many women found lovers. Women-only space, often hotly contested in the feminist movement of the time, provided a place of possibilities, for new forms and ways of living to take shape.

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11 The Pine Gap Women’s Peace Camp of November 1983, was a major action of the 80s, but is sparsely documented. The action is absent from scholarly articles and books, (apart from Margaret Somerville’s chapter and Alison Bartlett’s recent paper, and from histories of social movements and peace movements). Women for Survival self-published an undated book of images of the Pine Gap camp, and travelling exhibitions of memorabilia have occurred over the years. Bartlett points out that this absence of documentation is in contrast to the women’s peace camp at Greenham Common, which is iconised in popular culture.
The Pine Gap peace camp was a microcosm of tensions and debates current in the feminist movement of the time, which was made up of diverse frameworks, the central ones being socialist feminisms, radical feminisms (of which Lesbian Separatism was a part), as well as feminist organisations working within the system such as The Women’s Electoral Lobby. The organising collective of Women for Survival (WFS), a national organisation made up of a coalition of feminist anti-nuclear groups, was strongly weighted with members of the Ananda Marga.

Debates at the Pine Gap camp often concerned the limits of women-only space, including at what age male children should be included. Tensions erupted at the camp when an Aboriginal woman speaker at a rally at the beginning of the protest invited an Aboriginal man to speak, which resulted in many meetings and debates, often fraught with emotion, around issues of women-only space and Aboriginal rights and disenfranchisement of land. Prior to Pine Gap, extensive meetings were held with Aboriginal traditional owners until formal permission was gained to hold the action. Trade Unions were extensively lobbied by WFS to donate money to enable Aboriginal women to attend. Women’s Action Against Global Violence (WAAGV) (Women for Survival was originally called WAAGV) met with Arrente women in Alice Springs who were fighting to
preserve a sacred women’s site at Welatye-Therre. The Arrente women expressed concern that white women could damage Black women through (albeit unconscious) racist statements or behaviour, as well as fearing repercussions from police and authorities, and that Welatye-Therre issues could get ‘lost’ and be unsupported. As a result of the meetings it was agreed that white women would confront their racism through workshops and consciousness-raising groups prior to attending the Camp; that the advice of local Aboriginal women would be respected; and that there would be financial support offered to the struggle for land rights ("Pre Pine Gap Organisation"). As a result of these meetings, WFS ensured participants had cross-cultural training in its policy that all participants had to attend training sessions in awareness of racism and Aboriginal land-rights, as well as in non-violent action training, prior to the protest.

Affect is intrinsic to politics, and to protest. Silvan Tomkins noted that ideology, although an abstract system of thought, is imbued with affect via its practical application in the affairs of men and women (230). Affect is utilized, consciously or unconsciously, by social and political movements, in expressing the ‘cause’ and in arousing sympathy. My interest in the use of affect by political movements relates to my writing about protest in the novel, and in the development of characters involved in the protest scenario.

How did we protestors, so affectively aroused, perhaps to anger rather than fear, present messages in the media? Negative affect is powerful. Early eighties social and political movements often used visual imagery loaded with negative affect: they set out to instill fear, anger and moral outrage toward politicians, leaders, decision-makers and corporations – it was a counter-mobilization of fear.

Images conjuring strong negative affects such as anger and fear were employed in protest groups’ media to alert people to a dire threat. The media generated by social and political movements such as MAUM, for example, in the 1980s, commonly used such images. Uranium mining and the arms race is
(unsurprisingly) associated with images of death, skulls, and gas masks, as seen in the leaflet below.

Figure 3: MAUM leaflet. (Courtesy of the University of Melbourne Archives.)

MAUM street theatre commonly evoked scenes of Hiroshima, with black-clad, dying figures, the ‘survivors’, the ‘Hibakusha’ (those who have seen hell). WFS enacted die-ins, a symbolic representation of nuclear attack, where women in a circle raised a grey parachute to represent the ballooning of a mushroom cloud,
and would then fall back and ‘die.’ These were staged in various places (commonly in Martin Place in Sydney) as a lead-up to the Pine Gap Peace Camp.

Figure 4: ‘Die-in’ at Pine Gap Women’s Peace Camp 1983
Early eighties activists were resourceful in their production of print and other media. The explosion of sophisticated graphics and photoshopping programs brought about by the internet and the common use of personal computers was beyond the horizon. Off-set printing was still the common mode of print reproduction. Photocopiers had only just come in, replacing Gestetner machines, that had spat out smudgy leaflets from a roller cranked by hand. Flyers, posters and leaflets were printed from originals drawn by hand and typed on typewriters. Heavy, bulky, IBM typesetters cost a fortune and were just an emerging technology. Posters of this era, however, and hand-printed tee-shirts, were often striking. Posters, often silk-screen printed, were sometimes works of art, providing colour and drama to the often dreary walls of student households. They were often kept for decades, and proudly framed.
“The ability to focus blame is crucial to protest,” writes Jasper (414). Protest movements typically characterize enemy action in a negative light, and attribute corrupt motives. “Such characterizations enhance protesters’ outrage and sense of threat, transforming emotions at the same time as understanding” (Jasper 412). Villains are identified - these are the targets to which anger, or outrage, can be vented and fears and anxieties transformed into moral outrage toward governments or policy-makers perpetrating perceived injustices.

In the flyer in figure 6, below, for example, super-powers are depicted holding penis-like missiles, aiming at an innocent baby. Reagan and Brezhnev stand on an ice-flow, while a hunter bashes a baby seal to death in the background. Both presidents are depicted as ape-like, as cave-men, with extra-long arms and Neanderthal features.

![Flyer](image.png)

*Figure 6. Flyer. (Courtesy of University of Melbourne Archives.)*

Populations unable to focus blame are unlikely to protest. At America’s ‘ground zero’, the Nevada atomic bomb test site, people living downwind from the detonations were described in declassified documents as a “low-use segment of
the population” (Gallagher xxiv). These were Mormons living in Southern Utah who thought it would be unpatriotic and disloyal to speak out against the government, despite being subject to the drift of fall-out. They suffered the consequences – leukemia and birth defects, in silence. Atomic bomb tests were carried out when the wind was blowing their way, as the authorities knew that these down-winders would be unlikely to complain.

*

Positive affect – images of hope, were also employed in the media of protest groups’, for example, transformative slogans, such as “turn fear into anger - anger into action”. Humour was also used in slogans – “radioactivity fades your genes”, or “I’m tired of hearing about nuclear bombs – but I hope they never drop the subject”.

Singing, dancing and music are pleasurable, and these kinds of activities, often highly charged with emotion, heighten the joys of being with others, and help provide the motivation to stay committed (Jasper 418). Anyone could join in. Music and singing require little more than voices and clapping hands, yet can be effective in a protest to strengthen collective bonds and to help get a message across. Branagan writes of how recorded music was used at the 1983 Roxby protest - a car stereo played Midnight Oil songs, which led to mass dancing, and an effective blockade of the mine’s gates (2). Jasper writes that the richer a movement’s culture, with rituals, songs, folktales, heroes, and the denunciation of enemies, then the greater the pleasure in being involved (417).

1980s movements were aware of the power of protest in transforming emotions. Joanna Macy’s Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age, published in 1983, acknowledged the feelings of despair, isolation and powerlessness associated with the growing nuclear threat, and provided a theoretical framework for ‘empowerment work’, for shifting consciousness toward individual personal growth and collective social change. It’s a framework which is enjoying a resurgence today, empowering activists and others living with the threat and fear of global warming.
Affective bonds

It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid.

(Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*)

The contagious affect, the fear of global annihilation, permeates the boundary, which, like skin, separates the self from the other. This allows fusion into a collective or corporate identity held together by affective bonds and the neurophysiological states which amplify them. Earlier in this essay I discussed neurophysiological states such as those that occur in mimetic communication, where specific affects are quickly transmitted between bodies. Feelings of distress, for example, may be very affecting for others observing the distress - especially if they are already feeling somewhat distressed themselves. In this way, affect ‘resonates’ and amplifies between bodies.

Those who have marched or acted together in a protest will know the range of emotions, anger or fear, or a feeling of connectedness, even exhilaration, in acting together, being together with others who are fighting for a common cause.

Just as the negative affects – fear, anger, terror, rage, play a prominent role in the protest scenario, so too does joy, hope, compassion, pride, passion and the “…close, affective ties of friendship, love, solidarity and loyalty” (Jasper 417).

*  

In the past I was a protester. I was an activist – it was integral to my life. How can I touch this past, connect to the feelings I had with others, my ‘comrades’? I open one of the photo albums – old, a thick brown plastic cover, with ‘family album’ in gold script across the front. The photos are faded now, washed out. The colour photos from this era won’t keep as well as earlier black and white ones.
The photos of protests.

Photos as memory, a palimpsest. The photos themselves are static, unlike the ‘picture of Dorian Grey’. Though every time we look there’s a new story, another layer. Each time we retell there’s further construal of what’s before us. Each image has others attached to it beyond itself. Is it because we change?

The May Day photos. A serious and orderly line of young women head the march, holding up the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) banner. And behind them stroll a cluster of middle-aged types, mostly guys, union men. Greying hair, a fake leather coat, vests, pork-pie hats and jackets. A white-haired woman holds up a large red flag. She’s wearing a thick white beanie, white gloves, smart brown and fawn suit, high heels, white hand-bag over her arm.

And here, a cluster of my friends, six women standing close, almost touching, big red flags on poles slung over shoulders. They’ve turned toward one of the women, who looks as though she’s telling a joke or funny story. All are animated, laughing, smiling. The woman telling the story wears a leather jacket, worn over a knitted vest with hammer and sickle pattern, motorbike helmet over her arm. She died, tragically, in an accident, about five years after this shot was taken.

So many times I’ve examined this photo. What were they talking, laughing about? What was the story or joke? How could K no longer be alive?

They are close, we were close. One of the women in the photo was a lover, and she was the best friend of K. She was so badly affected by K’s death that she was ill for years, suffered a ‘breakdown’ – a long bout of anxiety and panic disorder.

But in this photo everyone looks happy. A chilly Sydney morning. Each of us wears a red CPA rosette, teaming it with other red items, pants and scarves. In the background of the photo a person covers her face, hand in a big red glove.
K is the only one looking out of the frame, toward the photographer, her chin thrust forward, her mouth a round ‘o.’ And my ex-lover, M, is gesturing toward her, thumb and forefinger joined. Could K be singing? I’m sure of that now – yes, that was the case. She is singing something and M is helping her get the right timbre and pitch.

And so this photo has attracted another layer. It’s this photo I think about when, in 1983, I write about characters at a rally, observed by the Briar character, who identifies them as a tight-knit group.

*  

What draws one to want to be a ‘member’? In the early 80s, many of us, myself and my friends, joined protest movements, political parties, and in so doing, took on philosophies associated with movements or organisations – Marxism, Socialism, Anarchism – this ism and that ism. We took on various forms of Eastern spirituality, or earth-based spiritualities, and experienced lifestyles, sexual expression, modes of dress, eating, ways of doing things associated with sub-groups within. At women’s protest actions, socialist feminists in 1940s op shop dresses and Doc Martins might rub shoulders with spike-haired radical feminists with Amazon axe earrings and goddess-worshiping white witches, tweedy academics, earth mothers in Indian skirts with portable sling-back babies. There were young women, old women, women new to the movement, women who did not adopt these styles. Women of diverse cultural backgrounds and Aboriginal women were there all along – but in the main the movement was Anglo and middle-class. Aboriginal women and Women of Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds and working class women were marginalised and often struggled to have their presences, their voices and issues heard.

These styles – involving diets, clothing, sexualities, were however, cultural, part of the movement’s collective identity, and an indication of its richness. Jasper writes that emotions are obvious in the ongoing activities of movements, and are important in terms of keeping the movement going, maintaining membership (416). Positive emotions – joy, enthusiasm, hope, pride, and affective
attachment to the group are pleasurable, and can be a part of what’s experienced. “The richer a movement’s culture – with more rituals, songs, folktales, heroes, denunciation of enemies and so on – the greater these pleasures” (Jasper 417).

Affect facilitates bonding. In fact, without affect, how could we bond? Affect streams around the creation of groupings, of the nodes and hubs that make up people networks.

My friends and I, members at the time of the CPA, held strong beliefs. We believed in ‘The Party.’ All of us were either working for the party or were active in unions. We believed in a socialist future. We worked to join and thread together a coalition of non-aligned Left organisations which would work toward common goals. But it was more than that. We liked, even loved each other; we had fun together; we identified with each other. We were a sub-group within the many groupings that made up the party. We were the socialist feminists, battling the power differences, the racism, sexism and homophobia inside the party as well as in the rest of our lives.

Jasper writes that it’s “…affective ties that preserve and maintain networks and give them the causal impact they have” (413). Affective bonds involving positive emotions, particularly in social movements, can be a pleasure, a joy. “Protest becomes a way of saying something about oneself and one’s morals, of finding joy and pride in them” (Jasper 415).

Group members can develop a ‘collective identity’, shared beliefs and principles, but not simply, writes Jasper, “…a cognitive boundary; most of all it is an emotion, a positive affect toward other group members on the grounds of that common membership” (Jasper 415).

I was identified with a particular sub-group which shared not only beliefs, but ways of living, involving diet, clothing and drugs of choice. As a lesbian I was marginalised by society, but the movements I was part of – gay, feminist, socialist, gave me, through friendships, a ‘family,’ a circle, a network.
Something to be a part of, the ‘we of me’. And this belonging was a source of strength and provided a kind of power.

I stayed committed to the CPA over many years, not only due to shared beliefs but because of the personal ties of friendship and love. The woman who had died had lived her life to an extreme degree, was at the centre of everything. She was a great activist; she had many, many, friends and lovers. She was a ‘hub’. And when she died it was not only a great loss to her friends and lovers, and to her estranged family – it was a loss to a whole community. Her death reverberated throughout the community and affected many people, even those who barely knew her, because as a hub she had touched many people, and everyone knew someone who knew her well.

How do I use this material without being didactic? In 1983 it can’t be the protest that’s the drama, the political action. The drama or action centres around the lives of people, their interactions, connections and disconnections. The novel is about love. Stories of love, threads that weave and interweave. This is the overlay, the mesh that holds the novel together, allowing explorations of theory.

**Ananda Marga and Affective Bonds**

Becoming a member of a political movement such as described above, can be similar to being in a family. You may be surrounded by images of yourself – others who dress, behave, eat and live in similar ways. Many people involved in political movements in the 80s eschewed their families of origin and sought alternatives, due to difference – their own difference in relation to their families, their world views and to society. The traditional nuclear family was seen by sections of the women’s movement at the time as oppressive – we were critical of the traditional nuclear family as a unit of patriarchy. Women had experienced oppression and put-downs from fathers, brothers and husbands. Women’s stories of rape, childhood sexual assault and incest were being heard. Women found the need to create space for themselves and develop affective ties with each other in order to discover their own strengths and voices. Some lesbian
women became separatists, and excluded men from all their dealings and relationships.

Young people rebel, throw off what is known, but in becoming ‘a member’ can replicate themselves in order to create safety and security. Continuing on from alternative lifestyles of the sixties and seventies, early eighties participants of the women’s movement and social and political movements as discussed above created alternative families, communal families with vastly different parenting styles to what they themselves experienced as children. The political movement or organisation they belonged to could also be an alternative ‘family’, such that friends, lovers, other members gained precedence over traditional family forms.

An early 1980s phenomenon in Australia was that many people joined new, emerging North American spiritual or religious groups and cults. A friend tells me she remembers a beach in Perth in 1982, studded with gleaming orange figures, as the Rajneesh moved this way and that, an orange wave rippling over white sand, shining people moving in clusters, moving apart, circles of orange people throwing orange balls.

The 1980s was a time of flux and change. It was a time of uncertainty. There was a nuclear threat, the impending end of the world. In such uncertain times there can be a public fear of loss of control, a sense that life will unravel. People in such times may turn to that which helps them feel safe; old values. To religious fundamentalism, to hatred, racism, cults (Kramer and Alstad 39). We are seeing this today, with the growth of fundamentalist Christian religious movements as well as Muslim fundamentalism.

The affective bonds in Eastern cults are most obvious, involving special names, meditations, diets, sexual restrictions or freedoms, ecstatic chanting, a regime which promises purification, which in turn relieves shame (bad karma) and induces collective joy.

12 Examples not mentioned in the text include Hare Krishna, Scientology, the Moonies, Children of God and the Jesus People. Erhard Seminars Training (est) was a popular organisation operating from the late 1970s, whose 60 hour course aimed to provide participants with a sense of enhanced personal power and transformation.
For a time, in the 80s, it seemed that almost everyone I knew was in, or connected to, the Ananda Marga (AM). Why was this? Were people seeking spirituality because it was no longer appropriate or satisfying in conventional forms, in older, organised religions? Spirituality was absent in socialist movements, in the CPA. Women left the Party and became white witches, worshipping goddesses, carrying out rituals, circle dances in the moonlight. Many women and men I knew joined AM. One friend I spoke with in researching this project, was conscious and articulate about her move away from Catholicism to the Ananda Marga – a spiritual and politically active community.

Sheldrake laments that we have “desacralised” our lives and environment yet unconsciously we continue to seek the sacred, suggesting that as tourists, westerners are often unconsciously trying to “tune in” to the vibrations and spirit of ancient sacred sites in countries such as Bali or India (22).

I believe that the lack of formalised ritual in Western lives is certainly a factor when people decide to join cults or ‘new’ religions, but here I will explore group membership in terms of replicating the family, and will view Ananda Marga (AM) as a more intense and obvious expression of the group. The purpose of my research into AM was to help provide a background and context for a main character, Frank-Govinda, in 1983. Writing about this character led the research in a particular direction – toward an exploration of why one would become involved in such an organisation, and what motivates one to stay. This will not be a detailed analysis of AM, but rather a view of the organisation as an example of the ‘group’ standing in for ‘family’, in view of affective bonds and affective resonance being the ‘glue’ that holds an organisation or family together.

**Sketch of AM movement**

Few scholarly resources exist on Ananda Marga – its presence is scant in sociological literature, despite the media’s attention and interest in the
movement’s activities in past years.\(^{13}\) In reference to AM as family, the following section draws on informal conversations with former AM members and others close to the movement in Australia in the 1980s.

Ananda Marga, meaning ‘Path of Bliss’ was founded in 1955 by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, an ex-railway workshop accountant from a lower middle-class Bengali family. AM claims membership of more than a million in over 100 countries, with the greatest number in India, particularly in West Bengal (Crovetto 26). Sarkar, known also by his Sanskrit name of Sri Sri Anandamurti, is affectionately referred to by members as ‘Baba’, meaning ‘father’. The guru’s legitimacy is not based on a spiritual lineage, as in many Hindu sects – his followers consider him to be an avatar of Siva – an ever-present, all knowing, omnipotent, entity (Voix 5). I refer to Anandamurti in the present tense, because although the guru died in 1990, he continues to be the movement’s spiritual head. AM members do not attribute death to the guru – but rather that he departed his physical body. The official AM website says the guru continues to be the “sole inspirational drive for the universal mission of Ananda Marga” ("Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar"). AM adherents practice a form of Tantric spiritual discipline which includes meditation, kiirtan (a form of meditation involving bodily movement and chanting), cleansing routines, the recitation of mantras, song, yoga and dietary restrictions. (AM does not see itself as a ‘cult’ - the organisation is recognised as a religious denomination in Australia.)

AM is a socio-spiritual organisation which combines social service with spiritual practice. Progressive Utilitization Theory, (PROUT), is a socio-economic and political philosophy developed by Sarkar, whose writings make up a massive body of work.\(^{14}\) PROUT propounded that all people should have the minimum of life requirements – food, clothing, shelter, education and medicine (Crovetto 42). Limited forms of individual ownership were not rejected by Sarkar, but he

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\(^{13}\) The only recent sociological academic papers I could find offering an in-depth analysis of AM were those by Raphael Voix and by Helen Crovetto which tackle the issue of the AM movement and violence and which are included in the reference list to this essay. Brief entries on AM appear in encyclopaedias on new religious movements.

\(^{14}\) Sarkar wrote 264 books in various languages. Many were originally written in Bengali and later were translated into English. The Prabhat Samgita (Songs of the New Dawn) comprise 5,018 songs in Bengali he composed (Crovetto 31).
stated that “everything is the common patrimony” (Crovetto 42). Ananda Marga’s social work activities are integral to its core value of ‘service to humanity’. Social work and humanistic projects range from the provision of food to the poor, schools, children’s homes, medical clinics and projects supplying relief in disaster-struck areas (including the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005). Sarkar/Anandamurti calls his followers to a life of spiritual practice and social service: “It is action that makes a person great. Be great by your sadhana [spiritual practice], by your service, and by your sacrifice” (Shrii Shrii Anandamurti qtd in "Service to Humanity"). Sarkar opposed the caste system in India, calling it a manifestation of evil. He defended the rights of animals, plants and even non-sentient entities such as rocks (Crovetto 10).

Ananda Marga’s social work is admirable, but has been largely overlooked and overshadowed due to the sect’s past associations with alleged violence, and the labelling of AM as a terrorist organisation.

If we have thrown off the traditional ‘family’, our family of origin – what is the purpose of finding an alternative? I’ve said earlier in this essay, affective bonds are vital in terms of holding social and political movements together. Therefore, consciously or not, it is in the interests of organisations and groups to replicate the ideals of family in themselves, and natural, perhaps, for people to look for such qualities in groups and/ or to ‘play out’ relationships and scripts formulated in the original familial unit. Dress and diet make up part of the culture of movements and add to their richness – and as well, provide members with mirrors of themselves.

**AM as ‘family’**

Food and diet help define culture and cultural groupings. Sharing foods is a part of bonding and ritual in human society. Family meals assist in establishing family identity, strengthen affective ties and create a sense of group membership (Fiese et al. 10). Mealtimes can highlight the dynamics of the family or group – factors including the kinds of blessings, seating arrangements and types of food can be highly symbolic (Fiese et al. 10). This is brought even more strongly into
relief within a group such as AM where ritual is formalised, where even the vibrations of meditation practiced prior to the meal influence the food. It is at family mealtimes that issues of exclusion and inclusion are borne out – as well as family tensions, and therefore affect.

AM members regularly gather for group meditation followed by a shared vegetarian meal. A “sentient” vegetarian diet in the Ayurvedic framework, is part of the practice of AM initiates. Eggs, garlic, onions and mushrooms are not permitted, nor any foods that stimulate, for example, coffee and chocolate. (A former AM member I spoke with recalled the difficulty in the 1980s in Sydney of finding cafes and restaurants that catered to such a diet.) Sugar, however, was an exception to the diet. An ex-AM member told me that group meals in the jugriti were formal, often accompanied by a teaching or story-telling. Following the main meal, however, Indian sweets were often served, and it was then that people might became more emotionally expressive, probably due to being affected by sugar in a diet generally devoid of stimulants. A special diet further adds to a group’s special identity and distinction, sets it apart from others, and therefore strengthens internal ties.

Family mealtimes may be played over and over again in memory, helping to create the feeling of belonging to a group, and therefore of safety (Fiese et al 69). The same may apply to social and political groups discussed in this essay, and strongly to AM, for whom food – the making of wholesome vegetarian food for its own live-in organisational workers and general membership, as well as part of its charitable works – was an important activity which aided bonding as well as added to the distinctiveness of the group.

Unspoken rules govern dress codes within social and political groups and subcultures generally, and within cults, for example, the Rajneesh, it is even more pronounced, with all devotees wearing various shades of orange, and therefore being immediately recognisable, as Sally Belfrage describes in ‘Flowers of Emptiness’:
Seen together, Bhagwan’s followers – or all in Poona at the moment – are less a show of types than of type. The few non-sannyasins stick out like strange weeds in an orderly field of corn...The rest are wearing their commitment in a solid mass of orange, though subtly varied from peach to burgundy... (162)

Within the domain of the AM family, dress is less uniform with ‘simple’ margis living and working in general society and not wearing any particular kind of dress. Only organisational workers, Local Full-Timers (LFTs), usually living in the organisation’s premises, didis and dadas, (Sannyāsis) dress uniformly in white pants orange shirts (or skirts and veils for women). Higher ranking acāryās wear all-orange garb, the male acāryās in turbans.

Surrounding ourselves with mirrors of ourselves, replicating ourselves, can help create a feeling of safety in a disconcerting world. Besani writes, “…mirrors can be used as instruments of ontological security. The world loses its threatening alien aspect if we can continuously recognize our own image in it” (208). As well, shared dress, foods and culture (as in group culture) helps support the organisation’s collective identity and assists members to stay motivated and committed.

Familial representations are strongly present within the AM structure. Anandamurti is ‘Baba’, the guru, the father. Baba’s image is replicated in the AM domain. It’s found on the walls of jugritis (ashrams), and pictures of the guru are often carried personally by devotees. Aspirants focus on their guru while practicing kīrtan, feeling him as an entity of pure love (Voix 10). Margis emphasise the feelings of love and joy they experience in visualising the guru and the strength and intensity of his love in gatherings, even if large numbers of people are present (Voix 10). Former AM members I have spoken with have evocatively described the intensity of feeling emanating from large crowds addressed by Anandamurti at mass AM gatherings in India, where, particularly the Indian devotees, more demonstrative than their Anglo counterparts, have wildly displayed their love and affection for the guru. Anandamurti and his
incarnations are seen as supreme consciousness or god (Liberating 85). The guidance by the guru of the spiritual aspirant is of the utmost importance. Anandamurti writes: “Brahma (Supreme Consciousness) alone is the Guru. He alone directs individuals to the path of emancipation through the media of different receptacles or bodies” (Liberating 10). In Anandamurti’s writings, supreme consciousness is likened to a loving and compassionate father, with a mutual attachment to his devotees (Crovetto 31). The aim of AM spiritual practice is liberation, but this is only to be gained via the guidance and grace of the guru (Voix 8).

In the 1980s adult AM members were known within the sect as ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ and were designated accordingly, depending on what wing or part of AM they were involved in. PROUT, for example, was divided into ‘girls PROUT’ and ‘boys PROUT’. In the 1980s Sarker’s Volunteers Social Service (VSS), created to keep order at large AM gatherings, had a corresponding women’s division named Girls’ Volunteers (GV). Women at the time objected that being called ‘girls’ as it implied women’s immaturity, and agitated for a name change. However, Sarkar denied the request – all human beings were the boys and girls of their loving father, supreme consciousness (Crovetto 10).

AM was thus constructed like a family, with an all-knowing, omnipresent father at the head, and below, a multi-layered membership of boys and girls, devotees who had the opportunity to move through different layers of initiation which gave access to various levels of spiritual practice.

**AM and emotion**

I asked a former AM member about the ‘emotional register’ of AM. She said the organisation was harsh, lacked love, and had a language of struggle rather than of compassion. She said a frequently quoted saying of Anandamurti’s was ‘struggle is the essence of life’. AM in Australia was very different to AM in India. While visiting India in the 1980s, an ex-member was struck by the austerity of the AM headquarters and buildings, where the didis and dadas, flat out with organisational duties, could give little time to even enquire about the
welfare of overseas aspirants assigned to them. Love and work in the sect was focussed upon carrying out the guru’s plans for humanity. Work was relentless. Nevertheless, strong bonds existed between members, many of whom gave their all to various political campaigns they were involved in, including the preparation and organisation of the women’s peace camp at Pine Gap in 1983.  

Earlier in this essay I discussed the activities of singing, dancing and chanting in political movements - how these can heighten affect and reinforce bonding. The joy of being with others helps motivate people to stay committed to a group – affective bonds between members are strengthened. AM members describe the love they have or had in taking part in Kiirtan, where a group chants or sings a mantra, usually ‘bābā nām kevalam’ accompanied by coordinated movement. Jasper writes that emotions rise during collective rites and the group’s sense of solidarity is reinforced, the “we-ness”(418). But it is even more than this - coordinated rhythmic movement historically has been a powerful force in holding human groups together, evoking shared feelings and what McNeill calls “muscular bonding” (vi). McNeill recalls the emotions evoked by taking part in army drilling exercises: “A sense of pervasive well-being…more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life…” (2). Here we move toward something larger than the family – the group mind, the hive. Indeed, AM was described to me by ex-members as being like a hive – the jugriti a hub of frenetic activity – the political activity, the meetings, the constant production of food for its own kitchens as well as to provide for others in need. AM was, and is, a hive, and a network – its hubs and nodes stretched out over Australia and the world – workers within different hierarchies and designations working for the greater purpose of the organisation’s aims, as propounded by the guru, for the collective good.

15 It was widely known in the 1980s that members of the Sydney Women’s Collective of Women for Survival, which organised the Pine Gap women’s peace camp and other protests, was predominantly made up of AM members. However, it was little known that these members were in constant communication with AM Headquarters in India, reporting on the work they were doing. Even the name, Women for Survival came about due to a directive from AM in India to change the name from its former Women’s Action Against Global Violence (WAAGV). The name WAAGV was deemed “too negative”, in the sense of being “against something” rather than “for something”.

16 Translated literally the mantra means “the name of the guru is absolute”, but a popular translation is “the guru loves all” (Voix 10).
The idea that synchronised movement improves group cohesion, produces positive affect and weakens the boundaries between the self and others, has been well researched. Durkheim described “collective effervescence” occurring as a result of synchronised group movement in his studies of mainly Australian Aborigines (216). Researchers have made similar observations of African dance, carnival revellers and ravers, where people moving in time with each other produce positive affect and help dissolve boundaries between the self and the group.

As discussed earlier in this essay in ‘Affect Contagion as a SWN’, mirror neurons in the premotor cortex of the brain are activated when one watches an action performed by another, and even if one hears the action performed in the dark. In a synchronised group action, mirror neurons, firing in sync, could elevate the predominant affect – be it joy or anger, and with it, ideology, the group mind, its collective identity.

**AM and persecution**

Ananda Marga’s official history describes the organisation as a victim of conspiracy and violence. Voix writes that it’s through this shared history and experience that the sect has developed a strong sense of community and belonging (10). Voix’s view however, is that the movement legitimises violence, that violence and secrecy is part of its esoteric initiatory process, common to tantric religious movements - thus violence plays a contradictory role, with orally circulating stories inside the sect telling of different realities to the sect’s public face (Voix 4).

It is not my purpose or interest here, however, to explore issues of violence or non-violence within AM, or to decide whether or not the movement is guilty of violence. AM has been labelled ‘terrorist’ by others, and the mainstream media
throughout the eighties referred to the sect as such. 17 In Australia, incidents attributed by the media to AM included allegedly placing a pig’s head dripping with blood on the counter of Air India’s booking office in Sydney, leaving a parcel containing a pig’s head at the reception desk of the Consulate general of India’s office in Sydney, stabbing an employee of Air India in Melbourne, and setting fire to the High Commission building in Canberra (Condon 26). AM members convicted of murder and conspiracy were pardoned in the end, and aspersions were cast upon Evan Pederick’s evidence following his confession in 1989 of placing a bomb in a garbage bin outside the Sydney Hilton.

For the purposes of writing the novel I was far more interested in what it was like to be a part of such a close-knit community, and what it is that holds such a movement together. I think though that AMs’ history of persecution, and its perception of itself as being a victim of ‘frame-ups’ is certainly a factor. Earlier in this essay I discussed how blame is integral to protest, that “the specification of blame generates villains” (Jasper 2). In AM, members working politically in peace movements were fighting against environmental threats generated by war-mongering governments, and as well, threats against their own organisation and members. As discussed earlier, activists from many organisations suffered (and still suffer) violence from those who perceive them as a threat, (a threat to jobs, for example, in the case of environmental activists) and government surveillance. Ex-margis from the 1980s recall rocks through windows, slashed tyres, and phones being tapped as a part of everyday life. They belonged to an organisation labelled ‘terrorist’, were often deported if travelling to India under their own names, 18 had members in jail in Australia and accused of murder, and as well, their own guru had been convicted of criminal conspiracy and murder. 19 As well

17 Following terrorism incidents around the world alleged to have been committed by AM members, Sarkar stated that he does not condone terrorism and would not leave jail by any other means than legal procedures (Crovetto 33).

18 In the early 1980s Australian AM members arriving in India were often being immediately deported. An ex-AM member told me it was thought that security forces in Australia were supplying the Indian government with the names of AM members, as AM was under suspicion in both countries.

19 AM’s persecution history goes back to the 1970s. AM was critical of the Indira Gandhi government in India and alleged it was corrupt. Anandamurti was arrested in India in 1971, along with several other disciples, accused of the murder of six people - ex-AM members. AM
as internal threats and threats to the organisation, AM perceived threats to humanity itself, in the form of a diffuse global disaster – Anandamurti called on members from all over the world to bring seeds for his seed-saving program, and to be prepared for impending disasters, and I believe people resonated with those sentiments at the time.

The AM family then, was not segregated from the community, for AM with its political and social service agendas has always been active in the wider society, but AM was set apart, was looked upon by the wider community with suspicion and fear. There were rumours and media reports of military training and preparedness, caches of arms secretly kept on land owned by AM in Gympie, in Queensland. There was an aura of mystery about AM. Activists in political movements were wary of them – they had a reputation for infiltrating and ‘taking over’ groups and organisations. And yet, in the early 80s, people joined and became initiated into AM in droves, many of them women, lesbians – as though it were a kind of contagion.

The AM family was frenetic; it was racing against time, against threats to itself and to the world, and succeeding to spread and grow, particularly in the 70s and 80s. Outside threats to the AM family on one hand created and added urgency to public campaigns such as ‘Free Alister, Dunn and Anderson’, and on the other, sealed the family off, increased the need to stay safe within a sacred circle of

denied the charges and imputed the Indian government with a frame-up. In 1975 the Indira Gandhi government declared martial law, and banned AM along with other political organisations - including Hindu, Maoist and Muslim. About 4,500 AM workers were arrested in India at that time, and AM went ‘underground’. The AM movement, which by this time had spread throughout the world, instituted its ‘free Baba’ campaign, and appealed to Amnesty International, and other legal institutions criticizing the Indira government’s conduct in Anandamurti’s trial, observing that the ban on AM obstructed the guru’s defence, as his attorneys were unable to present witnesses in his case. There was a world-wide protest by AM members for the guru’s release. Whilst in custody, Anandamurti is believed to have been poisoned, and margis were fearful that continued attempts would be made on his life. In actions unsanctioned by the organisation, seven Ananda Marga sannyāsīs self-immolated to try to draw international attention to their guru’s case. Following the lifting of martial law by Prime Minister Desai in 1977, Anandamurti was granted another trial, and he was acquitted of all charges and released in 1978.

20 The aim of saving seeds was to counter the transnational reduction of biodiversity – a huge problem today.
familial mirrors. For some, being a member of AM also isolated them from their families of origin.

This is the AM I write about in 1983. It is not the real AM, or for that matter, the ‘real’ 1983. It is an AM I describe following conversations and reading – a created world, which may or may not come anywhere close to anyone’s lived experience. The Frank character, a ‘lost’ child, whose own family – wife and child have left him, creates family ties within the AM movement, and assuages his hollowness with beings who look and feel like himself. He finds a father, Baba.

Frank joins others who are facsimiles of himself. But mirrors are ambiguous. Drawing on Freud, Besani writes that mirrors reflect, but simultaneously represent the self in a different space, and so ‘the family’ can raise confusion about the nature of the self, and boundaries of the self (201). He writes that we can try to stabilize the world by planting our familial image everywhere, eliminating distance between ourselves and others - but a mirror actually produces the effect of distance, that is the nature of the experience of looking in a mirror. We see ourselves in the mirror, “but the experience can paradoxically be considered as a model for our imagination of being different from ourselves” (Bersani 208).

The family can be both a source of comfort and safety, but the circle of mirrors, the self-repetition, may also become an enclosing prison. AM offers the safety of family – and a safety valve – an opportunity for change, the ability to transform oneself. In AM, via Tantra, the aim is for liberation, “…for union with unqualified and limitless consciousness – a state beyond the inhibiting ego and its segmentation of reality” (Liberating 3). Metamorphosis is offered in the form of identity with universal consciousness, with the shedding of ego and the merging with the oneness of all things (Liberating). It’s seen as an evolutionary process, in which the mind expands and the body transforms itself. In the AM that I write about in 1983, the Frank character seeks liberation from his past, from his guilt, by getting close to his guru, his father, and seeks to burn off his samskaras, his desires – his mental tendencies and negative traits, and cleanse his
mind. Frank-Govinda has been awakened, he has been re-born, and may now begin his life anew in the AM family.

In the AM of the novel, a man can become a table, a chair, a wall. One is many, many is one. The difference between things is illusory. Paradoxically, ‘freedom’ means giving up individuality and becoming one with everything. To be free, is to merge.

My writing of the Frank character in 1983 was stimulated by conversations with ex-AM members and others close to the movement in the early 80s. AM is of interest to me as an example of an alternative family, a system, a network, a hive, with affective bonds between members being a ‘glue’ that holds the group together. The theme of being ‘a part of something’, the ‘we of me’, and all its contradictions, is universal, and is intrinsic to my own writing, emerging out of my own past, my life experience with family and with groups – as illustrated by the memories shared in this chapter.
3. What are characters? Where do they come from? Why are they still here?

In the process of writing the novel’s characters, certain questions arose: what are characters? Where do they come from? Why are they still here?

Once I worked as a counsellor and for a time, did nightshifts at an emergency telephone service operated from a house in a secret location in the inner-Sydney suburbs. In the backyard of the house behind, an unseen budgie or parrot mimicked the phone sounds, so that sometimes it was hard to tell if a real phone was ringing or not. The house was said to be haunted by the ghost of a kindly elderly women who padded through the rooms and up the passage in the small hours. However, I never saw or felt her, and instead was haunted by other presences.

The nightshifts were sometimes nightmarish, sometimes quiet. Sometimes the phone never rang at all, though this was rare. The hours before dawn were often punctuated suddenly by shrieking phones, by emergencies, rapes, self-harmers, hoax callers. Many of the middle-of-the night callers were women suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and unable to sleep through the night, suffering panic attacks in the witching hour. Some of these women, having suffered sexual assault in childhood, had been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), more popularly known as multiple personality disorder, the psyche shattered into fragments, sometimes distinct selves, often unknown to the host body accommodating them, fragments of personality, children of various ages holding bits of memory too traumatic for the host to know.

Phone work is disembodied. This makes it even more powerful. Phone voices are drenched in affect. Affect runs along invisible lines, electric, from voice to ear. Even silences speak volumes. There is no visual presence, yet a picture is built up by caller and listener alike. So that a child’s plaintive voice calling for help in the night, while a reality check tells the counsellor this is no child but a full-grown woman, can cut like a knife in the heart.
There was a caller, Rebecca (not her real name) whose 14 or so parts, including child-selves, and babies, rang regularly. Their scenario was that they were part of a satanic cult, were being kept captive in a house, and were unable to contact police or authorities or services because they thought that everyone was involved in keeping them restrained and helpless. After a time of much work by the service, this young woman was rehoused into a situation where she felt much safer, and while not going into a long and involved story, had developed awareness of her parts, had begun integrating her memories, and was developing a trusting relationship with a therapist. This process took place over a number of years, and during that time she continued to contact the phone service after hours for support.

Once, in the early hours of the morning, Rebecca rings and reports that a number of her child parts have died. They’d committed suicide, they are gone, finished. Rebecca sounds calm. She names the parts – three-year-old Tom, five year-old Jess, eight-year-old Beth, ten-year-old Emma. They had not taken pills or cut themselves – that would be a worry, because it would have been Rebecca doing those things. They had simply dissolved. Tom who loved to play in the sand with his toy truck; Jess who loved kittens; Beth who wanted to be a ballet dancer, Emma who was serious and looked after the others in the ‘children’s room’ of Rebecca’s mind.

Rebecca finishes speaking and hangs up. I walk through the house, over the creaking floorboards, down the dim-lit passage to the kitchen at the back. The tv is mumbling in the back room, an old black and white movie playing. I get myself a cup of tea. I watch the set for a moment, it’s the film featuring Hayley Mills as a young girl, herself and a group of other children hiding a wounded criminal in their barn. I click it off. Silence, not even the sound of traffic. Then I turn and see them in the dim space of the lounge room, each in turn – little Tom, Jess, Beth and Emma. I’ve built up a mental picture of each of them over the year that I’ve been listening to Rebecca and her many selves. Each appears before me, and each dissolves. And I think, who is Rebecca – does she even
exist, I’ve never seen her. More questions emerge - What is the self? Where is it located? Where do parts go when they die?

Rebecca is representative of a narrative self, a good example of a perfect post-modern self. She is made of stories, as we all are. But the stories “she” tells of herself, and the stories I hear (as the listener on the phone) are split off and divided from her, the host, the host body. Her parts speak in different voices, they have minds of their own, are of different sexes, have different characteristics, and the reader, the listener, wants to believe in them. Isn’t this kind of dissociation a bit like that experienced by the writer of stories, the constructor of textual beings?

What are characters but “textual beings” (Keen 221), who have lived in the writer’s mind, are given to the pages of a book, where they live eternally, reliving their lives with every reader. Characters are beings who can be thought about, discussed, loved, debated over, who may arouse strong affective reactions in the reader “…as strong or stronger than those elicited by a real person” (Baudry 388). Fictional characters can provide comfort through difficult times, as Vargas Llosa wrote in ‘The Perpetual Orgy’, detailing his strong passion for Madame Bovary, whose suicide helped damp down his own suicidal feelings (Baudry 388).

Where do characters come from, but from ourselves, for we too can be thought of as text, our identities existing only in narrative (Currie 17). We are the stories we tell, the stories of ourselves and the stories we get from others.

Why does the idea of ‘character’ persist? Why is there a contemporary desire for representation, for realism, for heroes? Why is there a trend toward non-fiction books (Donadio 1), for ‘reality’ television, for blogging, for confession? A love of facts has seeped into fiction, with Kerryn Goldsworthy bemoaning a recent trend in novels that fictionalise real-life people or events (23). In the twenty-first century, a desire for, and enjoyment of realist fiction persists, presenting a conundrum for self-conscious, theoretically-aware readers and writers (Scanlon 87).
Characters can be powerful, may influence and change readers’ minds and lives. Writers may use narrative techniques such as first person narration and the description of characters’ inner worlds to assist readers to identify with and empathise with characters, but according to research, a reader’s empathy with fictional characters “…requires only minimal elements of identity, situation and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization” (Keen 214). Even one-dimensional characters of caricatural tradition invite reader identification along with humour and play (Gregson 152).

Characters give writers agency, a means of putting forth ideas, of constructing plot. “Character comes first”, says Shelby Foote. “…Plot ought to grow out of character. You don’t have to make up a plot. You have to have a person and place him in a situation, and a plot starts happening” (Coleman 73).

Who constructs the story - the writer, or the characters?

Many writers speak of their characters as though they are real, external beings, with voices of their own - characters that appear in dreams, or as ghosts that flicker in hallways, at the corners of their vision, that stand behind them as they write, as they tap at the keyboard, characters that grab hold of the narrative and run with it, take a novel in new and un-thought-of directions, like entities independent of the hand that holds the pen, the brain that does the thinking.

Salmon Rushdie remembers the day that Saleem’s voice “first burst out of me, the joy and liberation of that day…” (2). Jennifer Johnston advises that if you’re going to be a good writer, “…you’ve got to teach yourself how to make a character breathe, how to make a character appear to have a life even when you turn the page over and they’re not there any longer. I can’t explain how that happens, I just know that it’s one of the differences between good writing and just storytelling” (Roberts et al. 113).

A study of fiction writers found that 92% of the fifty authors surveyed reported at least some experience of what was coined ‘the Illusion of Independent Agency
(IIA’), where a fictional character is experienced by the person who created it as having independent thoughts, words or actions (Taylor 376). The published writers in the group had more frequent and detailed reports of IIA, suggesting the production of fantasy may occur more easily with practice or with expertise (Taylor 376). The writers as a group also scored much higher than the general population in empathy, dissociation and memories for childhood imaginary companions (Taylor 377).

The writers provided examples of characters who had taken over the composition of the narrative; who resisted the writer’s attempts at control, and who even left the pages of the manuscript to inhabit the writers’ worlds – for example to walk around the house (Taylor 376).

What is the difference between writers who experience their characters as real beings and Rebecca’s mode of existence, of containing many parts or selves within, who speak and act independently?

There is a big difference, because Rebecca’s life was hell. She was amnesic to her construction of her parts, she wasn’t an observer or reader of her own characters’ stories. Rebecca, the host body, experienced what she called ‘blackouts’ while her parts acted without her knowledge, causing extreme disruption and confusion in her life. Rebecca’s selves evolved out of her unimaginable pain due to sexual abuse from her own father, and others. Rebecca, like a living novel, held selves who were the keepers of memories, extremely traumatic memories. She suffered self-harm, suicide attempts. Her mind had fragmented, her life was fragmented, her mirror shattered into a dozen glittering shards. As James Glass comments on postmodernism’s critique of a unitary self: “Some linear connection to one’s own history and to the existent world is necessary even to organize the simplest of tasks” (6). That is, a unitary core sense of self is essential to the process of living a coherent life and constructing its narratives.

The art of fiction-writing and constructing characters clearly differs from the experience of those whose personalities are fragmenting. In Taylor’s study of
fiction writers, writers did score higher than the general population on DES (a measure of dissociative tendency), though the study found that as a group, they did not have an “unhealthy” level of dissociation (377). The literary narrative, no less than life’s narrative must be coherent. Even the most experimental fiction must have its own internal logic, for example, the novel ‘Working Hot’, by Mary Fallon, which uses multiple voices, unfolds as a cohesive entity (Fallon).

Whilst the experiences of DID sufferers differ from those of writers constructing characters, at the same time, there are a number of similarities. Rebecca’s situation is an amplification of something quite normal – a behaviour pattern manifested by most people at various times.

That is how we thought of DID in the service I worked for – as a behaviour pattern we all have, but in the women we listened to it was much more pronounced, at the higher register of the scale. Because most of us have dreams and nightmares, daydreams, we play-act, we have different sides to ourselves, our work selves, our home selves, selves that pertain to the things we’re good at, our ‘dark’ and ‘light’ sides.

In my own fiction writing, I sometimes base my characters on real people. They may be a synthesis of many people, all of whom contribute different characteristics. Sometimes there’s a bit of ‘me’ thrown in. Some characters are more me than others. I’ve heard other writers say similar things.

But I contend that in so much as we are made of stories, all my characters are ‘me’. These are my selves standing in for whatever psychological drama the story is working out. The unitary self may well be an illusion, but I cannot deny the experience of something, an Uber-self, finding a pattern in my work in progress.

In this chapter I’ve attempted to answer some questions I’ve asked myself in relation to the idea of ‘character’ in fiction. (What are characters? Where do they come from? Why are they still here?)
Before I had begun the novel, before I even knew the narrative, or where it was going, the characters were present. The characters were present in 2005, before I even knew I was going to write this novel. I look back in my writing journal of that time, at the first fragments which would emerge into a novel – and there are notes, phrases, descriptions of the Frank character, the Mark character. The Briar character appeared in the first short story I ever wrote, an unpublished piece about a young pregnant girl and her relationship with an old woman who feeds cats in St Kilda.

Mark and Frank are based initially on real people, Briar is a ‘made up’ character. Sharna struggled into main character position during a later draft. She was there at the start in the form of a different character whose name was changed and who grew into her.

The Mark character has appeared time and time again in other writings. A younger version of Mark, ‘Shane,’ first appeared in a short story: “Shane’s strides are long and loose and light, he’s nimble in the jerking train. His flannelette shirt is loose on his thin, rounded shoulders. His face is masked by hair” (‘Fool’ 69).

Like the Mark character, Shane suffers humiliations, feels himself to be an outsider. He runs away from his unhappy home, only to have his stolen money stolen, through a chance encounter on a train. But Shane survives, as Mark does. Loping through their lives, optimistic despite the setbacks, bumbling into dangerous situations but somehow getting through, often due to the help and kindness of others.

The Mark character also appears as the hitchhiker in my earlier novel, Earth Eaters. He is the jester, the fool of the Tarot pack, the man who is forever young, despite his age. He enjoys the sensuality of life, the feel of a cold beer in his hand, the sun on his back, the taste of a good hamburger, sex. He is naïve, an innocent, always on a journey, in search of experience. In 1983 Mark’s character
does change – he becomes cunning – but this alter ego doesn’t last long and at the end of the novel he changes back to the original ‘Mark’.

The Frank character in *1983* is the antithesis of Mark. Frank denies pleasure. He denies himself. His denial is related to his past – his guilt feelings about his son. He strives to absolve his past through ‘burning off’ his ‘samskaras’ which will enable him to become pure, to achieve the path of bliss. He seeks to be close to his guru, his ‘baba,’ a stand-in for his own father, so that his samskaras may be burned off more rapidly.

The threat of nuclear war affects each of the characters in different ways. Briar has an obsessive fear of nuclear war, emphasised when she becomes a mother. She joins the anti-nuclear movement and is able to absolve her fear through protest activity and connection with others.

Mark denies the nuclear war threat – he refuses to recognise it. He isn’t passionate about causes. Mark’s aim in life is to get a job and find a ‘place to be’, a place to belong. He’s living in a time of recession, of unemployment, cutbacks to services, but he doesn’t understand or recognise the wider forces affecting his fortunes. Mark’s use of drugs are a means of shifting to another place, away from a world that has locked him out of the mainstream. Drugs offer a connection with others and a life of discovery as opposed to the trail of knock-backs he’s experienced. Paradoxically, he’s able to ‘take control’, let loose his carnal self, and indulge in pleasure. Mark elicits sympathy as well as fear, distress, horror and alarm in others.

Mark and Frank are opposites in their ways of rejecting the mainstream. Frank strives to be ‘self-less’, Frank is ‘good,’ disciplined. Though Frank’s Eastern world view with its concepts of duty, obedience and surrender, is as authoritarian as the Western view of the struggle between good and evil (Kramer and Alstad 42).
Frank’s bonds are with his cult and guru. He becomes politicised through his involvement with the Ananda Marga. In uncertain times, in a shifting world, it’s the Ananda Marga that gives him a structure, a family, safety, and answers.

Fear of nuclear war gives a focus and direction to Sharna’s deep-seated anger. Her involvement in political action fuels and feeds her. She has no insight into the source of her anger – it is misguided and out-of-control. Sharna’s setting fire to BP House as a political action provides the main climax for the novel.

Through the process of writing the characters deviated from how they were originally visualised, and how they first came out on the page. Richard Ford sees his characters as being unfixed and changeable throughout the process of being made (Lyons 2). He discusses ‘character’ in terms of his own experience with what he knows about himself and others, and says character “…stressed the incalculable, the obscure, the unpredictable…” (Lyons 2).

The novel’s characters are mutable, rather than being fixed entities. They have histories, and this, to an extent will determine how they behave. But to me the histories come after the characters’ actions. The actions of a character, the ‘scenes’ he or she progresses through, evolve through the writing, perhaps as a psychoanalytical process, perhaps conditioned by books I’ve read. When I wrote the Frank character, for example, it seemed right to me that he should have an obsessive love for his guru, which led me to think that Frank would have some kind of difficulty with his own father. However, Frank’s problems with his father are displaced onto his son, whom he is unable to love, and simultaneously unable to forget.

The mutability of character is played out in the reader-writer-character scenario, where sympathies change. Readers of my novel have told me that the Frank character was at first endearing, but later in the book, exasperating, when he falls in love with a young woman who is not what she seems. His physical appearance even changes at this time.
Mark is naive, innocent, a Fool, but in Sydney he becomes mad and cunning when living on the boat in the harbour. He rips off Frank, and becomes unlikable to readers at that stage. Briar changes, gets stronger when she overcomes her fear, and forms a family of sorts with Mark.

Sharna is perhaps a more fixed character. We hope for her deliverance through her relationship with Julie, but instead she becomes even more destructive because she is unable to be ‘true’ to herself, unable to acknowledge her love for Julie and be truthful to Bram. Ultimately the only way out of the situation is to hurt herself.

In constructing characters writers give flesh to thoughts, and these powerful parts of us can be felt to have independent agency in the momentum of making art. A contemporary desire for representation persists, despite the awareness of many readers and writers of the role of fiction in its construction of ‘reality’.

Scanlon writes: “Stories about ourselves remain as central as ever to the ways in which we expound ourselves and attempt to resolve our identities… we have to believe that stories are representations because if there are no stories of this nature, there are no referents: we cease to exist” (107).

The idea of ‘character’ persists because in our stories we seek a mirror of ourselves.
4. St Kilda – ex-centric city

The beach at St Kilda has been cleaned up – gleaming yellow sand was exported from elsewhere in a Council operation and dumped here, replacing the grim grey sand of yesteryear. The little jetty remains, wading out on spindly legs. On the big jetty, Kirby’s ice cream bar has been rebuilt. The original Kirby’s burned down in a fire years ago, and now it’s a trendy restaurant and café. The esplanade clubs have been demolished, the Baths re-built.

I walk around Barkly street, where my old flat once was. There was a fire in the building, a year or so after I moved out. I heard about the residents being evacuated, standing in the street in their pyjamas. I’d returned a few years later to St Kilda to have a look. Lifted the yellow ‘danger’ tape and wandered through. Into the rooms I’d once occupied, the deserted, blackened rooms, like a house in a dream, now growing soft grey fungi in the corners of its ceilings. I now discover the old building is gone completely - a massive complex stands on the site, incorporating a shopping centre and apartment buildings. But what sharpens my memory on this visit is a smell. A distinct, indescribable smell, concentrated around those streets, the same smell that was in my nostrils when I lived there. Is the smell really there, or is it in my head? Is it a memory of a smell, bringing with it feelings from the past?

Beyond the revamped ‘Kirby’s’, the jetty ceases, the breakwater takes over – a long wall of large, black, glistening boulders, holding back and calming the sea. In between these rocks, fairy penguins make their nests, can be seen inside these hollows, calmly sitting upon their eggs and staring out with black, possessive eyes. On the side of the breakwater which faces the shore, a walkway extends, with seats, and plaques about the local wildlife, including penguins. Each day I walk out here and find older St Kilda residents enjoying the sun – elderly men in little trunks, their torsos tanned a deep leather brown. They call out to each other in loud voices, in broken English. I listen to their conversations, above the chinking of the yachts in their moorings, and wind-surfers flapping above the choppy water.
An older woman, Gloria, and her dog, join the men. She’s slim, and tanned, has long white hair and pale eyes. Her dog’s name is Chester, eight years old she says, but he looks much older. Tourists come and go, filing past, strolling along the little path, stopping to read the plaques. The men point out the nesting penguins, and people hold their digital cameras up to the entrances of the birds’ caverns – clicking and flicking, and then peer into their cameras and admire their shots.

A young German woman and Gloria talk. An elderly Greek man joins in, introduces himself as a ‘lesbian’. The girl walks off. “Oh you’ve frightened her away”, says Gloria. “But I am a lesbian”, says the man, emphatically, to all who will listen. “I’m from Lesbos”.

Gloria and I talk. She’s lived in a flat on the esplanade since the early 70s. I ask her about the past, has St Kilda changed a lot? No, she says, it’s still the same, hasn’t changed very much. She asks me again where I’m staying and where I’m from, and I realise she’s got dementia. The Greek man from Lesbos is quiet now, staring out to sea, to the jostling crowd of tethered yachts. He says to Gloria, quietly, he’ll walk her back across the road if she’s ready to go.

And so I think about stories, about how Gloria is losing hers, along with a sense of time. So she needs to keep asking me my story, to keep trying to regain her story. The old ingrained stories are in her, but she’s unable to re-invent herself, to make herself anew.

As an aid to memory I want to view images of St Kilda as it was in the early 80s, and so arrange to look through photographic files, meeting minutes and newspaper clippings at the local council. The helpful cultural development worker hands me a pair of white gloves and points out a filing cabinet which contains photographs, mostly unsorted. The pickings from the mid-seventies, early eighties, are fairly slim. But what is yielded up is the utterly different view of the St Kilda foreshore, of the facades of clubs and music venues of the 1980s, the old sea-baths, scenes of Fitzroy Street. The newspaper articles give insight
into the St Kilda clean-up operation, the development at the time, tenants battles, and old tenants union minutes, some with my name on them.

The photos display the old ex-centric St Kilda of pre-gentrification days. I view the shots of the foreshore clubs – Oscar’s Restaurant Cabaret, its ‘Night Moves’ disco, depicting African men in sixties gear and ‘afro’ hair-styles slapping bongo drums, ‘Bojangles’, with its ‘Les Girls’ sign, and the ‘Electric Ballroom’ music venue, next door to the sea-baths. I remember the absolute sleaziness of the place, the fascination I had for its utter alien-ness. The sea-baths were next door to the clubs, still used by older European residents, but also a seedy gay beat. And it’s this feeling of alienation that I try to convey in the novel, especially through the Briar character.

I find the photo of the ‘My Bare Lady’ strip club and I remember passing by it when I lived here, feeling utter disdain and disgust. Now I examine the photo with interest, noting its quaintness, its dated, sixties look. I remember a ‘Reclaim the Night’ march that proceeded past the sex shops and strip clubs of this part of town. Paint was thrown and splattered across the windows of these places. In the photo the strip club’s sign balloons out in 60s script, the announcements across its shopfront windows promise non-stop entertainment, the ‘Raimunda DeCastro – All Star Cast’. Either side of the doorway, a full-length poster of a stripper is featured, one a topless woman in flairs, the other a black woman seen from behind, arms outstretched, legs apart, svelte and shiny, her face smiling, looking over her shoulder. And I remember puzzling over this poster in this window long ago – was she wearing a body suit or not?

In the photo, reflected in the club’s windows is the street, traffic lights, cars. So the poster models appear to straddle the street, surreally transposed, dancing across the pavement, standing, arms outstretched, holding up the traffic. And the sky’s reflection – a mass of silvery clouds, an unreal light, a storm amassing in the distance. I could’ve been living there then, when this was taken. A feeling comes over me, as it does when I look at documents and newspaper clippings of the 80s – I’m in the characters’ world, I’ve entered their time.
Fitzroy Street photos. A night scene. The police on the kerb, talking with two solemn-looking men. Have they been mugged? Are they under suspicion? A gaunt-faced woman stands in a doorway, a black cat disappears into a gap between buildings. People hurry past, under the smashed lights and bright-lit signs – ‘Pizza Bella Roma – the Best!’

In another photo a thin woman leans against a sign: ‘don’t litter our city.’ A curly shock of hair down her back, a long scarf, high-waisted flairs, big shoulder-bag. She lovingly smokes a cigarette, pelvis thrust toward the traffic, that rolls past, cruising along the gutter, the gutter crawlers. And beyond is the street’s façade, an array of scattered lights, the endless conflagration of streets, a strange, dark city.

How do these photographs inspire the writing? They are a reminder of the city as it was - a ‘jog’ to memory – triggering other scenes. Triggering feelings which are then processed into the writing. The photographs of the night streets, of the night clubs along the esplanade, evoke the past, visual memories, and as well, affect, excitement and fear.

Change and re-organisation, and in the process, an exposure of layers and histories, is a theme of the 1983. The novel’s living city is a fractal body, a synaptic and affective entity, creeping forward, shedding skin, metamorphosing into new territories, new forms.

“Living cities have intrinsically fractal properties, in common with all living systems” (Salingaros 1). A city’s life is dependent upon its matrix of connections and substructure. Whilst the medieval city had a highly fractal organisation, evolving via pedestrian movement, the contemporary city, built or altered to accommodate the car, is disconnected, and veers away from fractal organisation (Salingaros 2).

The St Kilda described in the novel is fractal. It is old, grubby, ungentrified. Its pathways and byways were established by walking and social networks, and not by the convenience of car parks. It was once a suburb where mansions
overlooked the bay, a playground suburb of theatres, waterfront funfairs, dancehalls, piers and pleasure gardens (Peterson 1). Its streets are a mesh, its lanes crooked. At the time of the novel, the 1980s, the grand homes had long been divided into flats or boarding houses, with “pastel paint peeling off like skin”. It’s a suburb in decay. The Briar character imagines her decaying building as it once may have been – an elegant place surrounded by formal gardens. But the patina of decrepitude has its own elegance; the past can still be discovered in the ornamental facades of buildings in the city’s main street, “the stone cornucopias of fruit and flowers that swirl round the dates carved there, ‘1880, ‘1885’.

Yet, the St Kilda in the novel is in the process of change, re-construction. Most of the houses in Mark’s street are empty, the tenants evicted, and the days are permeated by the sound of bulldozers and the smell of dust from demolitions. Mark’s ‘warehouse’, once a cinema, is burned down in a suspected act of arson - to make way for what? A supermarket?

We love a city when we can connect to it intimately, and a warm memory of that interaction consists of visual, olfactory, acoustic and tactile connections. All these memories can be formed only on the pedestrian level, far smaller in scale than the shortest walkable path (Salingaros 16). Salingaros writes that the ‘soul’ of a city exists precisely on its smallest architectural scales, in “…the ‘detritus’, which modernism tried so hard to eliminate – unaligned and crooked walls, a bit of colour, peeling paint, architectural ornaments, a step, a sidewalk tree, a portion of pavement, something to lean against, someplace to sit down outside…”(Salingaros 16).

Older, pre-modernist cities are fractal “because they work on all scales”(Salingaros 3). The predominately pedestrian city was built over time – with continuous incremental additions – on a fractal model, without its builders being aware of it. The human mind has a fractal model imprinted in it, so what it intuitively generates will have a fractal structure (Salingaros 3). However most postmodernist and deconstructivist buildings do not employ ornament, preferring sleek and ‘pure’ surfaces. In twentieth century cities, small scale structures that
“anchored urban space.. such as kiosks, benches, porticos…were erased”, then footpaths, leaving only what met the needs of the automobile city (Salingaros 16).

The places in the novel are places I know, or knew – memories, places re-visited. St Kilda, Sydney, the desert, and parts of India. “Places must have some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning” (Cresswell 7). St Kilda has a rich history, and is therefore rich in meaning to those who are attached to the city as a place. The inhabitants know their city well – the cityscape is visceral, they merge with it.

We came to embrace St Kilda – we loved the danger, the excitement, the tawdriness. But we never did truly belong. We were, after all middle class kids, mostly Anglo kids. We had support, families. We could leave. And we all did, eventually. All of us left and took up our lives elsewhere.

I did not ‘belong’ in St Kilda, and neither do any of the main characters of the novel. Briar is attracted to the city because it is utterly different to her home town, a place she needed to escape from. Mark tries to find a home in the city – but his attempts are always thwarted. And Frank denies the pleasures of the city, living an austere life as a marga. These characters seek to belong elsewhere – Frank in the Ananda Marga, Briar in the anti-nuclear movement, and Mark in the drug culture. Sharna grew up in St Kilda but, like Frank, she denies its pleasures. She does not seek belonging but rather opposition. In the end, she’s unable to connect with others, and fights ‘the system’ as a lone crusader.

The streets are home, the streets offer shelter. St Kilda is an older suburb, ungentrified, familiar to its inhabitants. Familiar because of community, established links between the people and their neighbourhood. St Kilda is an ‘outsider’ suburb, a red-light district, an environment tolerant of artists, sex-workers, eccentrics, gays. It is on the metaphoric periphery of the city. Like a boundary at the edge of a fractal, it provides the momentum for change and re-organisation.
The characters have chosen a city which reflects their own lives. They too are on
the periphery, on the verge of change. They seek movement which will carry
them into the next phases of their lives.
Conclusion:

The novel’s characters search for a “place” that’s theirs, somewhere to fit in, often discovering they are out of their “habitus”. (“Habitus”, being a concept that attempts to explain how our individual and collective histories inform how we are in the world) (Probyn Blush 39).

Briar, a country girl from Queensland, feels alienated in the city; Frank is comfortable at the ashram but out-of-place with his flatmates, from whom he hides. Mark yearns for a space of his own: “Silence now, except for the traffic mumble that rises up to him from the freeway. If he lived in this room he could pretend the noise was the sound of the sea, humming him to sleep. If he lived here, if it was his. It was, for awhile. Now it’s all changed. Had he broken the magic by telling?”

The characters live outside the mainstream – survival means forming links, being a part of a sub-culture that sustains them. As well, in the anxiety-laden city, they are living under a regime of fear and threat.

Richard Sennett, viewing the history of the city through people’s bodily experiences, sees a geographic shift of people into fragmented spaces, weakening the sense of tactile reality and pacifying the body (22). The desire to free the body from resistance is coupled with the fear of touching in modern urban design. Order means lack of contact (Sennett 22).

Tomkins writes that fear and terror can be burned out by simple human contact. He gives the example of a terrified kitten being held until the fear passes. (Tomkins, qtd. in Probyn Blush 47). Probyn writes of the ‘longing in belonging’ (Outside 13), how being on the outside forces us to think about desire’s role in a social sense:

Desire is productive; it is what oils the lines of the social; it produces the pleats and the folds which constitute the social surface in which we live.
It is through and with desire that we figure relations of proximity to others… (Outside 13).

Desire remakes the social as a dynamic proposition (Probyn Outside 13). The desire to belong sets off different possibilities, it “…propels, even as it rearranges, the relations into which it intervenes” (Probyn Outside 13).

The desire to touch, make contact, to form networks, allegiances, flows across the city’s fragmented spaces. As Sennet writes, the “craggy and difficult” urban geography, “can serve as a home for those who have accepted themselves as exiles from the garden” (Sennett 25).
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