Regional, migrant and global affinities to place in *Seeds: A Permaculture Travel Memoir*

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**Abstract**

This article explores the traces of an author’s regional identity in a transnational travel memoir in which affinities to place are portrayed as pluralistic and fluid. It does so in order to explore the tenuous balance between eco-centric understanding of self within a community of ‘earth others’ on the one hand and fidelity to a regionally precise ‘home’ on the other.1 This constitutes an open-ended encounter with regionalism and ‘site-fidelity’ to destabilise the local/global binary. New understandings of foreign landscapes, places and cultures can be brokered upon a dialogue between those newly encountered landscape places, and the more intimately known regions from an individual’s past.

**Introduction**

I have come to accept that I am just another Australian trying to work out how we move beyond camping in this land to being rooted to it, part of a diverse and multicultural process that draws on many sources, ancient and recent, global and local. Permaculture has been my long sustained search to find home.

— David Holmgren2

This article is autobiographical and anecdotal. It explores the trace of an author’s regional identity in a transnational travel memoir in which affinities to place and concepts of ‘home’ are pluralistic and diverse. Employing the ruminative techniques of the lyric essay, I explore the tenuous balance between the protagonist’s fidelity to a regionally precise childhood home on the one hand, and her polyamorous affinities with place on the other. Parochial affinity to a regionally precise home on the Sunshine Coast is enfolded within an eco-critical awareness of belonging, ultimately to ‘the Earth community’,3 whose multi-species membership consists of human and non-human others. This constitutes an open-ended encounter with regionalism to destabilise the local/global binary, and furthers discussions of how permaculture might be mobilised in the service of an ‘ecocritical search for a culture of dwelling, or a viable modern georgic’.4
In her landmark treatise on local/globalist consciousness, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Ursula Heise argues that ‘over the last decade and a half, the concept of “globalization” has emerged as the central term around which theories of current politics, society, and culture in the humanities and social sciences are organized’. In the 2010 issue of *Queensland Review*, Belinda McKay comments on the same phenomenon, observing ‘the current preoccupation with globalisation’. My own essay conforms to the globalised trend. It has a strong transnational focus, yet the concept of the global articulated in this essay does not eclipse or deny the local. In other words, the research does not seek to ‘devalue the local in favour of the global’, but rather to deal with ‘issues of global change as well as local dynamics’.

The style and form of this article echoes the subject-matter. It too is shaped by ‘hybridity, creolization, mestizaje’. Personal anecdote interweaves with eco-critical analysis, photographs and excerpts from my doctoral creative artefact to produce an emergent picture of how the layering of identity and place-affiliation works in *Seeds: A Permaculture Travel Memoir*.

My analysis pays special attention to what the creative artefact reveals with regard to the themes and conventions of ‘permaculture travel memoir’. This essay contributes to an understanding of ‘doing’ permaculture as a distinct and powerful method of effecting social change, and furthering the personal and cultural transition from non-sustainable practices, including fossil-fuel dependence, towards an ecological culture premised on permaculture’s ethos of earth care, people care and fair share. The biophysical journey conceived in the creative artefact is a metaphor for a wider cultural transition, ‘from what Australian writer Deborah Bird Rose calls “man-made mass death” to environmental accountability’, and from ‘atomism to connectivity’.

In this article, I do something I have rarely had the occasion to do before, something I might have considered mildly distasteful in the past: I offer an appraisal of my own doctoral literary artefact, *Seeds: A Permaculture Travel Memoir*. Worse, the creative artefact I examine is not even a finished (i.e. published) work, but rather a work in progress: a doctoral creative artefact that will be submitted for examination in late 2017.

Although some individuals with a background in literary criticism (the art of critiquing literary works produced by others) might regard the self-critical approach as strange or unorthodox, self-criticism is an accepted practice among creative writers — especially those of us working within the academy, who are routinely expected to produce exegetical writing to accompany and explicate our creative work. Exegetical activity is an important dimension of the creative PhD or Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA). The expectation is that candidates will submit both a creative artefact and an exegesis; the latter is a ‘co-text’, providing exposition or critical explanation of the ‘meanings and workings of the creative piece under consideration’. Many early-career creative writers are shy about explicating their creative work, but the writer and academic Nigel Krauth makes a strong case that exegetical activity has long been a part of the gambit of the creative writer’s work. He describes Poe’s ‘Philosophy of Composition’ (1842), a detailed account of the writing of his own poem ‘The Raven’, as ‘a pioneer in the genre of self-critique’, and thus a forerunner of the formal doctoral exegesis. Krauth makes a compelling argument that
the creative writer is a legitimate expositor of her work, ‘Plenty of writers have dared to disregard the unproductive notion that only others can explain their work, and have taken on the multiple role of – what is it? – writer who is also self-critic and self-reader’.

With this in mind, I launch myself shamelessly into the multiple role of self-critic and self-reader. I begin with an account of how this article came to be.

**Background: The hunt begins . . .**

If travel is searching
And home has been found
I'm not stopping
I'm going hunting
I'm the hunter.
— Björk, ‘Hunter’

In March 2016, I received an invitation from my Honours thesis supervisor, Belinda McKay, to present a paper at the AsalVets Conference taking place in Caloundra in April. The theme of the conference was ‘Literary Regionalism’, and the region in question was the Sunshine Coast, geographically delineated as encompassing Caloundra, north to Noosa and Cooloola, and west to Maleny.

The invitation came as a surprise. It was a surprise because I am neither a member of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (the organisation hosting the conference), nor a veteran academic. On the contrary, I am an early career researcher and aspiring author. Naturally, I was perplexed. What credentials did I possess that warranted the generous invitation? The answer: my autochthonous Sunshine Coast origin! I am Sunshine Coast born and bred.

I was born at the Nambour General Hospital on 20 August 1982. I was raised for the first nineteen years of my life in Dulong, a rural suburb located 8.7 kilometres west of Nambour and 6 kilometres south of Montville. The Dulong plateau is part of the foothills of the Blackall Range. Mapleton, Flaxton, Montville and Maleny are the main settlements along the range.

The Dulong in which I grew up was predominantly a pastoral landscape, characterised by rolling dairy pastures, bunya pines (*Araucaria bidwillii*) and the occasional Moreton Bay Fig (*Ficus macrophylla*). The human dwellings were sparse, consisting of dilapidated timber farmhouses built in the traditional ‘Queenslander’ style.

My home was a four-bedroom Queenslander shared with my parents and older sister. The original structure was over a hundred years old and used to be inhabited by a family of farmers. This home, which my parents continue to inhabit to this day, was positioned on a gently sloping half-acre block, surrounded on three sides by dairy paddocks.

Our backyard consisted of a modest vegetable garden, a dozen fruit trees (lemon, mandarin, mulberry, loquat, japoticaba, mango, longan), native hedges (including white beech and lemon-scented tea-tree), bananas, the requisite jacaranda and a clump of bamboo so tall it blocked the morning sun and made my Mum complain...
of the cold during winter. The bamboo’s symphony of sylvan creaks and groans scared the childhood friends who slept over, especially on windy nights when the bamboo bent so low the leaves touched the corrugated steel roof, whispering, shuffling and caressing.

After completing my early education at an eco-centric independent school in the hinterland suburb of Kureelpa, I went ‘mainstream’, and in 1999 graduated from Burnside State High School. After a ‘gap year’ spent working and travelling, I moved to Brisbane and commenced a Bachelor of Communications (majoring in Literary Studies, and Film and Media Studies) at Griffith University, followed by BA (Hons) at the same institution. I remained in Brisbane for a total of six years.

In 2007, I made tracks. I travelled first to India and then to London. I spent the next five years living in a range of chaotic English share-houses/warehouses with my English-born partner, whom I met while travelling in India. In mid-2013, my partner migrated and I returned to the Sunshine Coast to settle permanently. We’ve been here ever since. Our home is a rustic one-bedroom timber dwelling on a large bush block in the secluded Obi Obi valley, west of Mapleton.

My partner and I travelled from England to Australia in rather a spectacular fashion: we eschewed flying (for ecological reasons) and travelled overland through twenty-one countries, relying exclusively on public forms of transport – buses, trains and boats. We closed the final watery ‘gap’ between Indonesia and Australia by boat-hitching from Lombok to Darwin on a private yacht.

Our ‘flightless’ journey took seventeen months to complete, and was accomplished on a shoestring budget. We managed on $15 per person per day via a diligent commitment to non-monetised ‘alternative tourism’ strategies such as couchsurfing, WWOOFing, wild camping, hitch-hiking and boat-hitching.

My remarkable experiences over the course of the ‘flightless’ journey home inspired me to apply for Higher Degree Research candidature at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). I was duly accepted into the Doctor of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) program. The concept for my research was to apply the twelve principles of permaculture design to the analysis, contextualisation and creation of an innovative hybrid permaculture-travel memoir. The title of the proposed permaculture travel memoir was Seeds. It was to be a narrative account of the real-life overland journey. I pitched the project to the USC Office of Research as an innovative hybrid of permaculture memoir/travelogue/nature writing – in other words, a wandering georgic investigating how individuals (particularly WWOOF hosts) in various parts of the world provide ‘their food, energy, shelter and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way’.

Designing and maintaining sustainable human settlements is the crux of permaculture design, articulated by permaculture co-founder Bill Mollison in the following terms:

Permaculture (permanent agriculture) is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way.

The thematic focus of the creative artefact on sustainability and its narrativisation of a real-life quest to locate and learn from individuals and communities who
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embody the ideal of ‘permanent (sustainable) culture’ is what makes the creative artefact a permaculture-travel memoir, as opposed to simply a travel memoir. One of the aims of the research is ethnographic: ‘preserving and documenting knowledges and ways of life that may provide visions of alternatives or viable pathways for sustainable lifeways’.

But how could I fashion my research on permaculture travel memoir so that it might synergise with the conference’s theme, Sunshine Coast ‘literary regionalism’, since the project was, and is, a transnational permaculture travel narrative? It has very little to say on, or do with, the culture or ecology of the Sunshine Coast. As a measure of how tenuous its connection is to my story, consider this: the initial chapter of Seeds is set in the Dubai International Airport, the second in Norfolk in the East of England, the third in Chefchaouen, Morocco, and subsequent chapters are set in Italy, Greece, Georgia, Russian, Kazakhstan, China, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste. None of the action, except for the final page of the memoir, is set on the Sunshine Coast. I could not admit this to my Honours supervisor and still expect to be welcomed at the Sunshine Coast Literary Regionalism conference. I was dismayed.

Motivated by a desire to be included in the conference proceedings, I started combing methodically through the fragments of story I had composed so far, in the hope I might find a reference to the Sunshine Coast that I had previously overlooked. I was two years into my doctoral journey at the time. Seeds was still something of a mess: temporally and geographically disjointed narrative fragments composed in an unsteady voice; some fragments written in past tense, and others in present; some fragments recorded in longhand on scraps of recycled paper, and others transcribed into Word documents. Needless to say, I was still a long way off shaping my permaculture travel memoir into a coherent narrative with a distinct beginning, middle and end. On and on I searched through the endless fragments of manuscript, hunting a trace of a setting, place or landscape identifiable as the Sunshine Coast. Eventually I found a trace of what I was looking for: a reference to the Sunshine Coast in a chapter of Seeds set in Morocco.

Creative artefact excerpt 1: Sunshine Coast literary regionalism

At this point in the narrative, the two protagonists, Nina and her partner Perry, have only recently left England. They have journeyed to Morocco expressly to volunteer with a WWOOF host who specialises in the construction of rammed earth kasbahs. Their host’s home is in a traditional Berber village in the Dadès Valley, 288 kilometres east of Marrakesh. The name of the village is Bouthagrar.

Upon arriving in Bouthagrar, the protagonists (who are both fledgling permaculture practitioners) foray out from the village into the landscape. They are drawn to the terrace gardens they spy perched on the banks of the river. They approach the gardens and begin to explore, weaving their way in and out of the polycultural terraces of figs, walnuts, wheat, almonds and roses. On the far side of the terrace gardens they come to the banks of the broad, clear, shallow Asif M’Goun River.

As the couple walks along the waterlogged shore, a memory is conjured. Nina falls into a reverie. She recalls the ‘life-river’ exercise she participated in last summer at a Permaculture Design Course (PDC) she attended in England. The ‘life-river’ exercise she recalls involved drawing a naïve picture of a winding river on a sheet
of paper, then plotting on each successive meander a note concerning a pivotal event that contributed to the awakening of her environmental consciousness. The excerpt from *Seeds* is as follows:

The first event I plotted on my ‘life-river’ occurred age eight. On this particular day I returned home from school to find the Moreton Bay Fig tree that had stood in lone splendour on top of the tallest hill in the neighbourhood felled. Six months later, a blonde-brick dwelling stood in its place; a blonde-brick dwelling inhabited by blonde-brick people. Recovering the memory and plotting it on my life-river stimulated a fresh wave of grief. To my surprise, the trauma wasn’t over — not even after the passage of twenty years.

Watching my bare feet sink into the sand on the wet riverbank, I recall the pilgrimages my father and I made to the tree before it was felled. It was our custom to go out walking in the late afternoon. Mum would be in the kitchen preparing dinner, and Dad would whisper, ‘Come on! To the tree.’

At the far end of the garden, near the cubby house, we’d cross over into the dairy pastures. Dad would stride over the double-strand barbed wire fence with his long legs. He would pluck the barbed wires open as delicately as though they were strings on a harp and I would climb through. Reunited on the other side, Dad and I would stride out into the rolling fields, our backs to home, and our fronts facing forward, toward the fig tree hill.

We took a different route through the paddocks every time, following our noses, following the logic of the land, but always, *always*, the objective was the same: to reach the majestic Moreton Bay fig tree on the top of the hill. The tree’s physicality was so compelling it drew us to it. To stand in its presence was to be transfigured.

On our way to the tree, Dad and I would search amid the waist-high grass for porous sun-bleached cow bones. The relics we found he carried home and stored in cardboard boxes inside his tumble-down weatherboard shed, along with other raw material for his biotic sculptures: driftwood, old tool-handles, and flotsam found washed up on Sunshine Coast beaches: coconuts, cuttlefish bones, twine.

When we reached the foot of the fig tree, Dad and I would stand quietly, filling our lungs with air and soaking up the shade. When I was ready, Dad would lift me into the lower branches of the tree that radiated outward like octopus tentacles. Sitting astride my chosen branch I would bum-shuffle out, further and further, the branch’s girth growing thinner and thinner between my thighs. The branch would sway. I would sway. The further I ventured, the more we swayed; a dance of girl and tree.

I would sit for the longest time, out on a limb, legs dangling, watching the sun go down. My nostrils filled with the aroma of grass and sundried manure; my ears with the sounds of leaf-on-leaf, chafing. Dad and I were completely enfolded by the tree’s ground-hugging embrace. If anyone approached, they would not have seen us, sheltered within our fig-tree bower, contained like Jonah in the stomach of the whale.

Those fig tree afternoons, there was no need to speak. Perched sublimely in the tree, I knew myself for what I truly was: a loved and valued member of a symbiotic trio: father, daughter, tree. Two of us rooted to the spot, and the other, the smallest member, swaying out on a limb — a bird, a leaf, a girl.
Analysis of excerpt 1: Permaculture as a way ‘home’

Fig trees very much like the fig tree described in the excerpt above can still be found dotted throughout the remnant Dulong dairy pastures. They are a prominent part of the settler landscape and ecology. Although most of the Dulong fig trees I knew intimately during my youth were felled during the 1990s to make way for houses, there are still many fig trees like them that grow in solitary splendour in the cow paddocks on the outskirts of Maleny, 23 kilometres south of Dulong. The triumvirate of cows, grass and fig trees is an iconic part of the visual lexicon of the Sunshine Coast hinterland.

The process of development and urbanisation referenced in Seeds has historical veracity. To this day development continues apace in Dulong, as it does elsewhere on the Sunshine Coast. Population forecasts for the region predict that by 2026 the coast’s population (estimated in 2011 to be approximately 267,252), will ‘increase by over 113,000 people, to approximately 380,649 ... an average annual growth rate of 2.39%’.21

On the Blackall Range, blonde-brick houses continue to be built where there were once fig trees and dairy paddocks. Prior to the fig trees and dairy paddocks, the country was inhabited by Aboriginal Gubbi Gubbi people. In pre-colonial times, the Blackall Range, including the suburb of Dulong where I grew up, was an important site for the Aboriginal harvest of bunya nuts, a nutritious ‘bush tucker’.

From a young age, my parents taught me how to gather, cook and consume bunya nuts, a practice I continue to this day. Mid-January is the time the bunya nuts fall. I know that the 10 kilogram bunya ‘bombs’ will be falling soon when my nephew celebrates his birthday on 18 January. This event is my biological cue that the bunyas are coming.

The historical veracity of the creative extract, however, is not the point. As Paul Williams notes, ‘the idea of how the past is accessed, reconstructed, researched and re-experienced’ is perennially problematic in the memoir genre. ‘The act of writing forces a set of critical strategies similar to that of writing a fictional work: there is a problem to be solved, narrative choices to be made, a theory to be tested.’ What are some of the ‘other aims’ at work, (besides historical and factual integrity) that motivated my ‘narrative choice’ to embed the fig tree reverie in the Moroccan chapter of the overland journey narrative?22

One of the aims relates to character development. The recollection of the fig tree afternoon is intended to draw the reader into a deeper engagement with the protagonist and to furnish some of her back-story. The reverie offers the first glimpse (and one of the only glimpses) of the landscape to which she is returning. It also illustrates how her interest in the environmental and her burgeoning passion for permaculture unfolded.

Considering the broader political and cultural concerns of permaculture travel memoir as a genre, what ‘other aims’ might I be attempting to achieve with this excerpt? The irretrievable loss of a beloved component of the local, natural environment is a pivotal moment — one might even say archetypal — in personal narratives about the environment and the awakening of environmental consciousness. Events like the one my protagonist recalls are ubiquitous in permaculture memoirs — which is to say memoirs written by permaculture practitioners about their personal transformation through permaculture.
In *Seeds*, the felling of the tree is framed as an archetypal fall from grace, and has resonance with Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Paradise. For the character, Nina, the felling of the fig tree symbolises an end to the age of innocence, and a burgeoning awareness of the destructive appetites of humankind. It signals her eviction from an expansive common, symbolised by the cow paddocks and fig tree hill, where she once roamed freely with her father. The tree being usurped by a ‘blonde-brick house’ signals the start of a process of ‘privatisation’ that eventually prevents the character and her father from taking their afternoon walks. It is a process very much like dispossession.

In her introduction to an edited volume of autobiographical writing by permaculture practitioners, Caroline Smith comments:

Many writers reminisce about a childhood where they worked in the vegetable garden with parents or grandparents, caring for chickens or foraging for wild plants. Growing up in wild places, or the inspiration gained from time spent in the natural world, has been formative for many, pointing to the importance of bringing up children in ways close to nature. A number of stories show the impact on a child growing up with sensitive adults who have a reverence and a respect for nature, a conservation ethic and often, an unconventional, maverick even, view of life.\(^{23}\)
Regional, migrant and global affinities to place in *Seeds*

Figure 2
(Colour online) Preparing bunya nuts. Source: Nina Gartrell.

Figure 3
(Colour online) The island of Castellorizo, Greece. Source: Nina Gartrell.
The excerpt quoted above conforms to this norm. It shows an adult — in this case, the protagonist’s father — modelling sensitive interactions with place, particularly an attitude of wonder, respect and attunement. The father’s behaviour is typified by a careful engagement with, and reverence for, the natural world. Through his example, the young Nina learns how to be attentive to place, including how to follow the logic of the land. It is the father who suggests that they take the walk, and the father who lifts the girl into the tree. It is the father, too, who stands watch silently at the foot of the tree until the girl is ready to come down. His ‘rootedness’ enables her to enjoy the precarious experience of being ‘out on a limb’, testing her own physical and psychic abilities.

With regard to the power dynamics of the ‘symbiotic trio’ (father, daughter, tree), the youthful Nina also possesses agency. There is a sense that she is collaborating with her father on the terms of her/their engagement with this place. She considers herself a ‘loved and valued’ member of the trio. The tree is likewise possessed of agency. It is a charismatic tree. Its presence ‘draws’ the characters to it, and is even capable of transforming them. The girl and the tree ‘sway’ together. They are portrayed in mutually constitutive relations: the tree is affected by her just as she is affected by the tree. It is a shared experience of place, and demonstrates how the protagonist has incorporated plants (the tree, the grass) and another person (her father) into her sense of home.

The father and daughter portrayed in the excerpt are heroic figures that ‘stride’ out into the cow paddocks, co-conspirators on a secret eco-quest to find bones and commune with the fig tree. The elegiac tone captures the longing of an émigré for a beloved childhood home that has been lost, and for a sense of safety and belonging that has been difficult to cultivate in her adult life. One might say the excerpt typifies ‘childhood Edenic nostalgia’.24

On the one hand, the excerpt is about childhood, and how childhood is in essence a ‘place’ to which none of us can ever return once we have attained adulthood; on the other hand, it is emblematic of a much larger society-wide, even planet-wide, ‘fall from grace’. The protagonist’s longing to be restored to that sweet place, perched in the fig tree’s branches, is part of her hankering, articulated in several instances throughout the narrative, to see the natural world restored to an Edenic state of biodiversity that notionally existed before capitalism and industrialisation.

The theme of humanity needing, urgently, to return to a state of connectivity and interdependence with the natural world is framed in the memoir’s epigraph, drawn from the lyrics of a Joni Mitchell song, ‘Woodstock’:

We are stardust
Billion-year-old carbon
We are golden
Caught in the devil’s bargain
And we’ve got to get ourselves
Back to the garden.25

Getting ‘back to the garden’ is a central theme of the memoir, both literally and metaphorically. It is what motivates the protagonist during her quest for home. It is also the reason why she has chosen to pursue permaculture as a way of
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life. The title of the song from which the epigraph derives, ‘Woodstock’, refers to the iconic music festival that took place in upper New York State in 1969, when the environmental ‘hippie’ movement was at the height of its powers, both imaginatively and politically.

On one level, the epigraph is a tongue-in-cheek comment on the protagonist’s ‘hippie naïveté’. However, it also contains a vital clue to one of the key themes of the memoir: anthropogenic climate change. The reference to ‘carbon’ and to all forms of human life being ‘stardust’, implies the processes of climate change and evolution. Climate change is highly relevant, given that the protagonist’s decision to travel overland is motivated by a desire to reduce her carbon footprint, and to avoid feelings of ‘carbon guilt’.

David Holmgren, one of the co-founders of permaculture, articulates his practice of permaculture as part of a ‘long sustained search to find home’. Implied in permaculture is ‘the ecocritical search for a culture of dwelling’, which is a sentiment I invoke intentionally. For instance, during a two-day train journey across the Kazakh steppe, Nina reflects on the reason for her attraction to permaculture, and what permaculture offers by way of an appropriate solution, or response, to the current ecological crisis:

What is permaculture, if not a contemporary philosophy and set of practices, to help navigate our way back home to the garden we’ve all been laying waste to, and help restore that garden to a semblance of how it looked, felt, smelt, tasted, and sounded, before our fall . . . before the era of capitalism, oil and exile dispossessed us from our one true home, Earth?

Excerpts 2 and 3: Other regional affiliations

Although there is no doubt that the character, Nina, harbours an enduring attachment to her childhood home on the Sunshine Coast, the longer she spends travelling, the more polyamorous she becomes in her affiliations to place. The nature writer, Robert Macfarlane, writes compellingly about ‘how people make sense of themselves using landscape, and their passage — imagined and real — through it; how landscape shapes — scapes — us both in moment and memory.’ This process is richly demonstrated in the narrative through the character of Nina. Although she initially pines for a romanticised version of her childhood home, she gradually awakens to an awareness of her membership of the Earth community. She realises with joy and surprise that, contrary to what she initially believed, she can feel ‘at home’ in a range of culturally and geographically diverse places.

For instance, while travelling on board a Blue Star Ferry from Athens to Castellorizo, the Aegean island where the protagonist’s Yiayia (grandmother) was born, Nina undergoes an epiphany. She comprehends viscerally, not purely intellectually, that not only is she a ‘native’ of the Sunshine Coast, but that she also has roots in Greece.

This is her first visit to the country of her forebears. The nearer she draws to Castellorizo, the more sense she makes of her past, her nature, passions and predilections. Aspects of her nature that were previously murky begin to take on a new shape and meaning. Like the swan who initially believes she is an ‘ugly duckling’, Nina realises that her youthful predilections make sense in the context of her ancestral home:
Somewhere in the aquamarine waters of the Aegean my Yiayia’s island awaits. I stand impatiently at the prow of the ship, gripping the handrails, willing the island to appear — this old friend whom I’ve never met but with whom I already feel on intimate terms. *I’ll know it when I see it*, I assure myself, glancing down at the wavelets sluicing off the prow. *You’ll know it when you see it*, I repeat, *by powers of divination, you’ll know*.

Resisting the urge to throw myself overboard and paddle the rest of the way (miraculous rescue by dolphins vis-à-vis Arion), I wonder if I should ask Perry to lash me to the ship’s mast as Odysseus asked his crew to do as their boat drew near the sirens’ lair. Dangling my torso over the railings, I gaze into the murky east, to the Levant and the Middle East.

Now I am here, I realise why I feel — have always felt — a connection with the peoples and cultures of this particular region of the world; why I chose, as a teenager, to practise belly dancing; why I can eat more *lakoumi* than anybody else I know, and why Arabic words make my stomach contort with love. I am native to this place. Beyond Castellorizo, lies another reason for my at-homeness in this region — the island of Cyprus, where my Pappou, grandfather, was born. Cyprus, 68 km west of Syria.

The heat of the sun, now high overhead, ratchets up the intensity. The air crackles with static and my stomach lurches. Avidly I watch the island unspool itself, piecemeal, from the coverlet of haze. The silhouette takes on more colour and definition the closer the ferry draws. Before the announcement is made over the intercom, I already know this little island with the steep sides, twin humps and deserted rocky foreshore is Castellorizo. Home.

As the ship rounds the corner and enters the harbour, I see the blue and white flag flapping and I raise my hand in a wave of recognition. Another granddaughter of Castellorizo has returned.

Castellorizo is not the only place Nina visits over the course of her journey from England to Australia that evokes feelings of recognition and homecoming. Tibet is another such place.

The character’s connection to Tibetan culture is more tenuous, less steeped in genealogy. Her feeling of belonging in Tibet is not predicated on her ethnic identity, but rather her spiritual proclivities. As a devout meditator and sometime student of Buddhist doctrine, Nina feels drawn to the culture and landscape of the Buddhist kingdom of Tibet. As she approaches the ethnically Tibetan town of Xiàhé in Gansu (in what is now the People’s Republic of China) on board a bus, Nina undergoes another type of homecoming:

It is after midday by the time we arrive in Xiàhé. The bus approaches a fine gompa, the Labrang monastery founded in 1709. It is the most important monastery outside of the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture, one of six major centres of the Gelug, or Yellow Hat Sect, to which the Dalai Lama belongs.

As the bus draws near, my guts grow fluttery. I feel much the same as I did on board the Blue Star Ferry as it neared the horseshoe harbour of Castellorizo. It is a homecoming of sorts.
Further down the road, as the bus travels through a series of high-altitude meadows, ‘the untouched core of the Tibetan plateau’ where ‘salt and pepper yak graze on olive green grass and herds of long-horn sheep range’, Nina’s feeling of homecoming deepens. She recalls the days when she and Perry first met in India. Their first topic of conversation was Tibet, and the likelihood of Tibet ever gaining its independence from China. Gazing out the window of the bus, she experiences the overwhelming feeling that she has ‘arrived’ somewhere deeply special and familiar.

Each unfurling vista makes me gulp. I want to impress this vision of Tibet upon my mind’s eye forever. Here ... Here ... I am here ... I wind down the window, winded by the power of each new panorama of grassland, and each bend of rocky river as it reveals itself.

‘Perry, we’re here,’ I say, turning to my companion. There are tears in my eyes, and in Perry’s too. For both of us, Tibet has been, and perhaps always will be, a home of sorts. A shared interest in the plight of Tibetan refugees exiled in northern India was what enlivened our first conversation in a café on the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh, when we first met, five years ago. Later, Perry joined me in Dharamsala, home to the Tibetan government in exile. Here, we mingled first kisses with longer and more intense debate about the future of Tibet, carving out a preliminary understanding of one another and the future we might share.

Back then, the ‘whys and wherefores’ of how two people from opposite sides of the world might share a future, or a home together, did not concern us. Finding a home and a way to live in harmony is difficult ... falling in love, by comparison, is easy.

The memory of those days makes me smile. It was so long ago and we were both so young and flighty, eager to pledge allegiance to love and mighty causes like Tibet. All these associations of Tibet and love, dispossession, migration, displacement, exile, and freedom mingle. It is a heady concoction. Compounding the inner turmoil is the fact I haven’t slept in three nights. Three nights on board this nightmare bus.

As we continue to travel south, I entertain hopes for the future: our tiny, globally ‘insignificant’ future together as a couple — as well as the monumental, unknown future of the Tibetan people and their homeland.

Nina’s feeling of polyamory in her affections for place intensifies over the course of her journey, until there comes a point when she reflects on how every place is a potential home. It is not the point of this article to interrogate whether this feeling holds, or is rooted in actuality (or was merely a moment of travelling élan). For the purpose of this article, this episode represents the zenith of a ‘global consciousness’, the realisation of a truly ecological understanding of herself as belonging to an Earth community. Regional and national feelings of identify are, for the time being, subsumed within an overwhelming sense of global belonging:

The orange mandarins that I hold in my hand crystallise the immense period of time Perry and I have been on the road; the immense variety of eco zones, ecosystems, landscapes, and cultures, we have ranged across on our way east, falling in love with one place after the other, fascinated and enchanted by the cultural and biological diversity we find ... never wanting to leave, always wanting to stay and experience more, to see out a round of seasons in one place ... but never able
to, always compelled to move on, incited by the imaginary ‘home’ that awaits us at our journey’s end.

What is the journey overland but a tantalising slide-show, a silent feature unreeling visions of changing places, polycultures, people . . . ? No place better, nor worthier than any other, only different. Have I lived in any of these other places before? All these affinities, all these potential ‘homes’.

At this point, Nina has reached a new realisation that the ‘home’ that awaits at the end of her journey is an idealised, ‘imaginary’ home. She no longer trusts essentialist understandings of home or even nationality. She has become, in effect, a citizen of the world, with multiple affiliations to people and places. The protagonist realises that homes are not only inherited, that they are not only a fact of biology or ancestry or even geography, but rather something that can be cultivated — like a garden. Nina’s conclusion is that place-making and, likewise, home-making are a matter of duration. The likelihood of feeling ‘at home’ is enhanced considerably by one’s commitment to staying in a place long enough ‘to see out a round of seasons’ — that is, to harvest what one has sown. This understanding precedes from a distinctly agricultural, in this case permacultural, ontology: it evokes the farming almanac, of which the structure of the memoir is a kind of parody, arranged formally into five ‘parts’ that correspond to the phases in the life-cycle of a seed: dormancy, germination, flowering, fruiting and seeding.

Privilege, mobility and the globalist consciousness

Before venturing to the conclusion, I feel compelled to make the point that the protagonist’s polyamorous affinities to place (the Sunshine Coast, Greece, Tibet . . .) and her growing feeling of belonging within an Earth community arise from a privileged position — socially, economically, and ethnically. Genuinely marginalised or displaced persons would probably not identify with the protagonist’s feelings of global belonging.

The protagonist’s protracted search for home is without a doubt a privileged one. She has not been displaced from her homeland in the manner of a refugee or asylum seeker, nor has she any personal experience of having her homeland invaded and usurped. Hers is a wilful search for an ideal home, motivated by a selfish desire for self-actualisation, learning, and personal and spiritual growth. ‘The freedom to choose where to live, what kind of life to lead, who to be,’ says Richard Mabey,33 is ‘one of the great privileges of being human — or of being a well-off First World human.’ This is indeed a privilege to which Nina and her partner, Perry, are privy.

Despite the sincere and heartfelt nature of the protagonist’s feelings of affection for the places and people she encounters in the course of her travels, she is to some extent naïve, idealistic and ignorant of how rare her good fortune is. She does not perhaps fully appreciate how freely and fluidly she moves across borders, and the relative peace and safety in which she travels. The high degree of mobility and freedom she enjoys is partly a dispensation of the Australian passport on which she travels.

This is not to say that the protagonist is entirely unaware of her privileged status. There are a handful of occasions when she acknowledges this status, as well as the exceptional nature of her ‘permatravels’. One such occasion occurs in a chapter set
in Morocco. She observes how few women are present in the central square, and naturally wonders where the women are and what they are doing. She herself is sitting in a café drinking coffee and eating bread — enjoying a privileged state of leisure. She is surrounded by men. She finds the disparity between her position and that of the local women unsettling, and comments, ‘But still I wonder, where are the other women? Why is it okay for me to be here but not them? My white skin, my ethnicity, my university education are privileges I’ve done nothing to deserve.’

On yet another occasion, the protagonist finds herself discussing her travels with a Chinese immigration officer. The officer, who has never had the good fortune to travel, is wistful, and expresses a desire to do what Nina and Perry are doing: travelling overland across the world. Intending to be encouraging, Nina informs the officer how easy it is to travel long term and frugally. The episode concludes with an admission to herself, ‘I’m in denial . . . We are rich . . . rich and privileged.’

Being rich and privileged does not, however, prevent the protagonist from developing feelings of sympathy for — even solidarity with — truly displaced people. The difficulties Nina and Perry experience while attempting to obtain a Chinese tourist visa at the Chinese embassy in Astana, Kazakhstan prompt Nina to comment on the difficulties that beset truly displaced persons:

> The long hours waiting at the Chinese Embassy are painful and upsetting. To allay my impatience, I think of the ordeal of red tape and refusals that besets genuinely displaced persons. Our trials are nothing in comparison. It makes the waiting and not-knowing more bearable. It makes the snow falling on our heads, wetting our cotton clothing, bearable too.

The matter of homelessness and the plight of genuinely displaced persons arises again in a chapter set in Jakarta. While travelling through the outskirts of the city on board a train bound for Yogyakarta, the protagonist observes the flimsy accommodations of people who are living in shanties beside the railway tracks:

> The train picks up speed. The backs of buildings slither past, glimpses of urban life. Beside the tracks are shanty shacks constructed from swatches of fabric, sheets of black plastic, twine, corrugated iron, and the lids of polystyrene boxes sewn together: a bricolage of discarded items. What a contrast to the beautiful rows of allotment gardens glimpsed, a year ago, on board a train from Barcelona to Figueras in the north of Spain. Other memories are stirred, of the tents I glimpsed beside the freeway in Paris, the day we left London and crossed the English Channel; another form of flimsy accommodation for the world’s myriad displaced people. It’s only a fluke of nature that I’m not one, I remind myself. Circumstances can easily be reversed.

**Conclusion**

The layering of regional, migrant and globalist affinities in *Seeds: A Permaculture Travel Memoir* might be understood through the metaphor of Russian Matryoshka dolls. Whereas the protagonist initially conceives of the Sunshine Coast as being the only place where she can ever truly ‘belong’, her experiences travelling overland prompt her to discover that she is capable of polyamorous attachments — she can feel love and attachment for multiple places simultaneously. Affinities to place are
no longer understood as mutually exclusive, but are experienced by the protagonist as enfolded, one within the other, thus the metaphor of Russian dolls.

The protagonist’s metaphorical journey, initially typified by an émigré’s sense of exile and alienation, burgeons into an eco-critical understanding of self as embedded in a rich web of ecological interconnections. Nina carries this new understanding of herself home to Australia, where she tends her connection to the places with which she fell in love over the course of her seventeen-month overland journey by planting and tending the heirloom fruit, vegetable and herb seeds she gathered, saved and swapped over the course of her journey.

The ‘real’ biophysical seeds she acquired include tomato seeds from Athens, carob seeds from Castellorizo, eggplant seeds from the Pyrenees and barley seeds from Tibet. These she sows into the soil of her native Sunshine Coast, and through the act of tending the plants that grow from the seeds, and consuming the crops yielded by those plants, she feels she is tending the connections she has made to the people, places and non-human organisms encountered in other parts of the world. The seeds are symbols of these other people and places. The implanting of the seeds into the soil of her ‘native’ home offers a neat metaphor for the integration of those other places, people and experiences, into her sense of self and identity. This is a symbolic act of commingling, with lasting implications for the local ‘outer’ ecology, as well as the ‘inner’ landscape or ecology of the protagonist’s heart and mind.

The outcome of the protagonist’s ‘ecocritical search for a culture of dwelling, or a viable modern georgic’ is depicted in the creative artefact as a joyful realisation that she is not, and never was, apart or separate from nature, but deeply enmeshed in a rich and diverse web of ecological interconnections, a ‘co-participant in earthly reciprocities of being, becoming, and dying’.34 Thus the journey undertaken by the protagonist in *Seeds* is both a geospatial one, from England to Australia, but also a metaphoric one, ‘from atomism to connectivity’.35 The memoir is ultimately sceptical as regards ‘local rootedness’, and validates what Heise calls ‘individual and collective forms of identity that define themselves in relation to a multiplicity of places and place-experiences.’36

So ends my hunt for a trace of an authentic Sunshine Coast identity or landscape in my doctoral creative artefact. The trail I have followed has led me on a chase through Morocco, Greece and Tibet, and likewise through the murky terrain of self-criticism, autobiography, textual analysis and ecocriticism. What next? Or perhaps, more to the point . . . where next?

**Endnotes**

Regional, migrant and global affinities to place in Seeds


8 Heise, *Sense of place*, p. 5.


10 Rose and Robin, ‘The ecological humanities in action’.


12 Krauth, ‘The preface as exegesis’.


14 ‘Couchsurfing International Inc. is a hospitality exchange and social networking website. The website provides a platform for members to ‘surf’ on couches by staying as a guest at a host’s home . . . Homestays are consensual between the host and guest, and the duration, nature, and terms of the guest’s stay are generally worked out in advance. No monetary exchange takes place except sometimes for compensation of incurred expenses (e.g. food). It is common practice for guests to seek non-monetary means to show their appreciation, such as bringing a gift, cooking a meal or teaching a skill.’ (‘Couch Surfing’, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CouchSurfing.

15 Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) is an international network that connects volunteers with hosts in a range of countries. In exchange for food and free board, WWOOF volunteers spend a minimum of five hours per day engaged in a range of activities around their host’s home/farm. These activities might include, but are not limited to, gardening, maintenance, natural building, coppicing, cooking, preserving food and caring for livestock.


20 This name has been changed to protect the identity of the individual.


24 Williams, ‘Writing the memoir of self-erasure’.


29 Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 117.
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31 The Greek name for the sugary, rose-flavoured desert known outside of Greece as ‘Turkish delight’.

32 Heise, *Sense of place*, p. 4.


34 Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 117; Rose and Robin, ‘The ecological humanities in action’.

35 Rose and Robin, ‘The ecological humanities in action’.

36 Heise, *Sense of place*, p. 5.