

## Personal histories/collective biography: ideas for a biography of place suggested by two local exhibitions of personal migration histories

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Collective Biography conference convened by the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, Australian National University and held at the National Library of Australia, 8-10 September 2008.

### Introduction

The collective of my paper is locality. And the localities concerned are two places in regional Australia: Lightning Ridge and Robinvale.



Map showing Lightning Ridge and Robinvale. Designer: Paula McKindlay

Lightning Ridge is an opal mining town in central north New South Wales. Robinvale is a horticultural town on the River Murray in north western Victoria. Both have very culturally diverse populations and my paper looks at how cultural diversity and migration history are expressed in each place. The material I'm using is drawn from a research project which developed migration history exhibitions in each locality with a focus on local personal experience in historical context.<sup>1</sup> The responses of local audience members to the personal histories and my own observations of the communities throughout the time I worked there (from researching local history to collecting visitor responses to the exhibitions), provide the basis for my discussion.

My interest in biography is informed by oral history and life story and by questions in these studies about how individuals 'compose' as Alistair Thomson has said, their stories of experience in relation to available discourse and material circumstance (1994: 8-13). The understandings of self and community they express in individual

<sup>1</sup> *Migration Memories: creating an analysing collaborative and imaginative approaches to exhibiting Australian migration history* was an Australian Research Council Linkage Project based at the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University and in partnership with the National Museum of Australia (2005-08).

form are distinct but threaded with commonalities. As oral historians like Thomson have shown the commonalities do not uniformly reflect such social positions as class, culture and gender but are employed variously to ‘make sense’ of particular histories and circumstances (eg Perks and Thomson, 2006). For the oral historian or the biographer working in this vein, the question is how to make sense of these sense-makings as a basis for a further composition in another genre. What I’m presenting here is an initial composition of local understandings of culturally diverse places.

The *Migration Memories* exhibitions were a **collection** of migration biographies, rather than a collective biography, but the ways in which local people engaged with them and articulated their responses them reflected understandings of the collective. One strand of responses highlighted collective practices and understandings of cultural diversity, suggesting strong distinctions between the ways in which Lightning Ridge and Robinvale ‘do’ and express their cultural diversity. Another strand of responses concerned the exhibition as an experience of engagement with fellow residents and suggested an active inquiry about ‘you’ and ‘me’ and our relationship in this place. Nezaket Shulz in Lightning Ridge spoke most eloquently in these terms:

‘It’s like I think you have walked into a huge living room and there are all these people who have all known each other and who thought they knew each other. But... [the exhibition] actually connected some of them more to each other by reintroducing them to each other... Even though one has known them, but never actually known what their connection to something else - to the bigger picture - was.’<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I’m working with both sets of responses; those that highlighted practices of cultural diversity and those that reflect the story-making of collective biography – not just putting myself in the picture but drawing (and re-drawing) the picture of us.

### **The exhibitions and collection of responses**

As they inform the material I’m discussing I want to mention certain aspects of the exhibitions and my approach to collecting responses to them. The research that the exhibitions were part of focused around the idea that using individual perspectives and experiences of migration in museum style social history exhibitions might open spaces for reading cultural diversity, more inclusively, less hegemonically. Specifically they invited reflection on ‘us’ through personal engagement. They did not include an integrated narrative of local migration history but were framed with the idea of ‘the world in Lightning Ridge/Robinvale’. Through the individual stories they presented some of the journeys over time and across place from the colonial period to the present, including those of Indigenous people, that were characteristic of each place.

The individual stories were developed with local individuals for whom the particular history was significant, either because it was their own, that of a forbear or of vital meaning to them through connections with place and culture. The personal perspective was provided in dialogue with its wider migration context – literally using my words and those of the individual concerned, as well as images and objects that opened up both personal and historical dimensions. For local audience members who generally knew or knew of at least some of the individuals whose stories were

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<sup>2</sup> Nezaket Schulz, Lightning Ridge visitor response interview, 4/9/06.

featured, the personal view brought the ‘you’ and ‘me’ of ‘us’ into sharp focus; our differences and similarities.

In documenting responses I was interested in how people engaged with the exhibition when they came to see it, who came to see it and what they made of what they saw. I wanted to know how they might speak back to the exhibition from a personal perspective – perhaps speak themselves into it through their own migration history – and in how (or whether) they might read it in terms of the local contours of cultural diversity, as the shape of us, the residents of this place. To this end, I collected conversations with people who came to see the exhibitions – working from whatever seemed to have been most striking to people about what they’d seen – whatever was on the tip of their tongue.<sup>3</sup>

Audience responses were not the only material that provided me with information about how each place worked and saw itself in terms of its mix of cultural backgrounds. I was also interested in how the community organisations I’d worked closely with saw the exhibition as an event, how it was publicised, and so on. Together my observations of these activities, the exhibition ‘conversations’ and my initial research in each locality provided me with material about key practices and narratives which predominantly and distinctly characterise Lightning Ridge and Robinvale as culturally diverse regional townships.

### **The localities**

The distinct environments of each locality and the ways they have been used over time provide context to local social life and to perceptions of collective character.



Lightning Ridge mining camp with hoist and wind generator. Photographer: Jenni Brammall.

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<sup>3</sup> I’d like to acknowledge the help that Ursula Frederick and Laura Hartley gave me in collecting responses in Lightning Ridge and Robinvale respectively.

Lightning Ridge is obviously marked by its independent mining history and lifestyle. Opal has been mined there since the very early 1900s and mining continues to co-exist with pastoral activities. Mining in Lightning Ridge has never been managed by large companies with a workforce – in fact this has been actively resisted. You could characterise it as a long term centre of individual prospectors living on their claims – which the above image shows. Both independence and cultural diversity are seen as badges of LR identity and the interest in such self representation is heightened by the role of tourism in the local economy. But perhaps even without tourism eccentric self representation would be a thriving enterprise in Lightning Ridge.<sup>4</sup>



The sculpture at the entrance to Lightning Ridge. It's known as the big agi – an agitator is one of the iconic machines of opal mining – and was painted by local artist, John Murray. Photographer: Jenni Brammall.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2005 the Lightning Ridge Transcultural Community Council received funding which enabled the purchase of flags of all countries of origin represented in LR. They're flown on various occasions such as Harmony Day.

In Robinvale water in the form of the River Murray has been central to the town's development as a horticultural centre.



The River Murray at Robinvale. Photographer: Jo Sheldrick



Highway sign at the entrance to Robinvale. Photographer: Jo Sheldrick

Robinvale township was built in the 1920s, on land that had been identified for future purchase in an original pastoral lease. It was developed as a soldier settlement irrigation area after the Second World War. Until quite recently dry land farming was a significant part of the local economy. Since the 1970s agribusinesses have become part of the landscape of horticultural work with the recent entry of several run by managed investment funds.<sup>5</sup> This development marks a move from small independent

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<sup>5</sup> The *Migration Memories* research took place before the impact of the global financial crisis on managed investment funds and their agribusinesses.

blocks of vines and market gardens, to larger businesses worked with contract labour. The change has been underlined by the advent of water trading and the capacity of the larger businesses to buy the water rights of the struggling farmers, and of many of the small horticultural businesses. Robinvale is less self-conscious about its identity than Lightning Ridge – though the early history of the town means that it has a strong association with the First World War as well as the second and since the mid 1980s it has been twinned with the French town of Villers-Bretonneux, now becoming a key site for Australian war remembrance. This badge of identity co-exists with others of a more horticultural nature such as the common boast that Robinvale has the largest carrot farm in the southern hemisphere.



Robinvale was built as a private town in 1924 and named in honour of the builder's son, Robin, who was killed in France in 1918. Many streets in town are named after places in France familiar to Robin. The town park is named Caix Square. Photographer: Jo Sheldrick.

The cultural diversity of each location arises from its history of land use – including colonisation and dispossession of the Indigenous people and the livelihood it has offered to immigrants.

The traditional owners of the country in which Lightning Ridge is located are the Yualaraay. Many maintained connections with country by working on colonial pastoral stations but were increasingly dispersed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1936 a number of families who had remained at a local government settlement were forced to move to the Brewarrina settlement where they did not have traditional connections. From much the same time, Indigenous people from various tribal backgrounds who were now in the region following pastoral work, saw opal mining as an alternative livelihood. During the second part of the century a number of Indigenous people, including those with traditional ties to the region, have made Lightning Ridge their home. In Robinvale, Latje Latje have strong traditional connections with country but other River Murray tribes are also well represented there. Early pastoral activity and removals of Indigenous people meant that from an early time, Indigenous people of

the region moved away from traditional lands and as they say ‘kept a low profile’.<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s when the Robinvale Irrigation Settlement was established, seasonal horticultural work was a drawcard for Latje Latje and others in the region. In a move that was more typical of a much earlier period, Robinvale authorities removed these people from their camps along the river to a purpose built settlement of huts called Manatunga. While there is an awareness of distinct tribal backgrounds there is also a group of Indigenous Elders in Robinvale who, recognising the history of forced movement and dispossession as well as the background of interaction between river tribes, call themselves the Manatunga Elders.

The population mix as a result of immigrations in both locations is very broad. Lightning Ridge residents include people from over 50 different countries. In Robinvale there are over 40 different countries of origin. For both this is a quite significant diversity in populations of around 7- 8,000. Apart from Anglo-Celtic Aussies, eastern and northern Europeans are strongly represented in Lightning Ridge and at present the majority of Asians are from the subcontinent and the Philippines. In Robinvale people from non Anglo-Celtic backgrounds are predominantly from southern European countries, the Pacific Islands, and South East Asia. Most recently the town has become home to a small number of refugees from Afghanistan. In Lightning Ridge cross cultural marriages include families that bring Aborigines and post war European migrants together. In Robinvale marriages between people of Anglo and European backgrounds are common but it seems that some Italian families still seek marriage partners from Italy.

Both places experience difficulties in collecting accurate census figures. In Lightning Ridge there’s a general distrust of government, particularly amongst older Eastern Europeans who feel they’ve escaped to freedom in Lightning Ridge. In Robinvale more recent issues of overstaying and other visa violations work against accurate population figures.

Another commonality is that both localities are on the edge of their local government areas. Lightning Ridge is in Walgett Shire and is in a constant state of battle with it, not least because of many residents’ desire to identify themselves as a culturally diverse mining community as distinct from the surrounding, much less diverse, pastoral communities. Robinvale on the other hand, through active and determined councillors, has insisted on being heard by the Swan Hill Rural City Council, of which it counts itself an important part.

### **Distinct narratives and practices of cultural diversity as expressed in responses to the exhibitions**

A strong tendency in response to the Lightning Ridge exhibition was to look at it as a collection of **stories** rather than as **migration** stories. In Robinvale people were more likely to categorise the stories by ethnicity; ‘the Tongan story’, ‘the Italian story’ etc. In Lightning Ridge migration was more likely to be an experience of individuals than groups, and ethnicity a quality of individuality. *Why isn’t x mentioned, he was a real character. Or, You haven’t got a Finn in the exhibition. Probably the most wealthy person in Lightning Ridge is a Finn – his house has opal embedded in the swimming*

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, Latje Latje Elders, Robinvale, 2007.

*pool*.<sup>7</sup> In fact for me it was hard to resist the idea of Lightning Ridge as a collection of eccentric ‘real characters’ of whom I met more through collecting responses.

One chap came along to tell me his story. He didn’t want to look at the exhibition, expecting that it would be all lies. *You’ll find that people in Lightning Ridge don’t tell much that’s the truth. Better not to know people’s backgrounds here.*<sup>8</sup> Such scepticism and secrecy was unthinkable in Robinvale, but in Lightning Ridge it connects with a storyline of fugitive identities and escape. One man said, *I think many reasons why people go to far away places are quite sinister.*<sup>9</sup> He then told his own migration story in terms of ‘going mining’. This story highlighted threads in others that tied ‘going mining’ with narratives of escape to freedom, of adventure and chance, and of the lure of opal. In Lightning Ridge these narratives complicate the understanding of migration history and in some ways democratise understandings of cultural diversity. This inclusiveness can extend to Aboriginal people, especially where they participate in the narrative of coming to Lightning Ridge for opal.

Perhaps the way opal mining qualifies migration opens the way for a newer narrative of ‘us’ in Lightning Ridge – harmony in cultural diversity. *The migrants, the Aboriginals and the colonials [i.e. graziers], we all work together.*<sup>10</sup> The Transcultural Community Council which was one of the local partner organisations in the research, sees Lightning Ridge’s ‘open diversity’ as an opportunity to encourage and promote harmony. It has deliberately steered away from the term ‘multicultural’ and its ‘ethnic’ connotations, as suggesting exclusion. For them **crossing culture** is more inclusive. The Council saw the exhibition itself as fitting closely with their intentions to encourage a stronger understanding of all the different cultures in Lightning Ridge.<sup>11</sup>

Another strong theme in Lightning Ridge responses concerned ongoing movement and connection between the Ridge and other places. A number of visitors were seasonal locals who spend a number of months of the year at the Ridge, or who keep up a long term association sporadically. One couple talked about their grandchildren who variously live in Germany, Ireland, on oil rigs and at Surfers Paradise. They said, *People are spreading out everywhere now.*<sup>12</sup> Another younger couple have a house in New Zealand and a camp at the Ridge and move between the countries according to the weather. One man whose family has become quite wealthy in Lightning Ridge told me of his funding of schools in India that he visits regularly. Two local artists responded by telling me that their paintings have been bought by people from all over the world, and they no longer have any idea where they are. A more historical perspective comes from an opal miner who has written opal fields histories and lived in Lightning Ridge since the 1960s. He traces his own family mining history back to the Ballarat goldfields and before that California. He spoke of other journeys, mapping typical routes of opal mining and opal business – Germany, Adelaide, Coober Pedy. In response to a photo of an automatic dump hoist he said that it was invented by Eric Catterell – *it all started here in Lightning Ridge and now*

<sup>7</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 27/8/06 conversation 2

<sup>8</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 22/8/06 conversation 1

<sup>9</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 30/8/06 conversation 1

<sup>10</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 2/9/06, conversation 5

<sup>11</sup> Christina Johansson, Lightning Ridge visitor responses 2/9/06, conversation 6; conversation 7a; interview 2 4/9/06

<sup>12</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 26/8/06, conversation 5

*it's all over the world, New Guinea and all over.*<sup>13</sup> The opal trade itself is one of global connections. The century-old connection with Ider Oberstein goldsmiths continues to this day. Japan is a more recent connection.

The world flows in and out of Lightning Ridge. People burrow underground for opal but one hole is easily superseded by another. They often come by chance – the story of arriving and staying more by accident than design is ubiquitous. Their dwellings are perches on the surface. Robinvale is altogether different. It is on a road to Adelaide but it is possibly known better in Tonga than it is in Australia. *Yeah, Robinvale is on the Tonga map*, said the younger generation of the Tongan family I worked with.<sup>14</sup> Robinvale is a place of planting and growth, of settlement and somehow negotiating that settlement.

The people who came to the exhibition in Robinvale were predominantly locals. They expressed local migration history in terms of ‘waves’. Some saw this as starting with the colonial period, some with the beginning of market gardening, particularly by Italians who came between the First and Second World Wars, but generally it was seen as a post Second World War experience. The soldier settlers who took up grape growing blocks coming mainly from nearby Mildura and Redcliffs were the first to arrive at this time. They were followed by the Greeks and Italians who were followed in turn by the Tongans and the Asians. New waves can be overwhelming for those of the preceding wave. In the Tongan story, Maama says proudly, *We're helping to build Robinvale.*<sup>15</sup> Someone whose dry land farm has just been sold to Macquarie Bank who will turn it over to almonds with Tongan labour, says in response, *Well, we felt we built the township.*<sup>16</sup> There are also more directly contesting stories concerning the waves such as that about the role of the Greeks and Italians in changes in the town's industry: either they saved Robinvale by diversifying the horticultural industry when the bottom was falling out of the dried fruits market, or they forced the dried fruits market out of existence.

Waves follow a predictable pattern of experience whether you are part of the wave or watching it come into shore. *Every beginning is hard. We didn't like it when we first came here*, said a member of the founding generation of a Greek family wine making business.<sup>17</sup> At first there's resistance and stand-off, possibly overt hostility, then there's settling in which is really a matter of staying around and doing something productive. You move from the pickers hut to your own block or into town, you have children who go to the school, who join the football club. You do voluntary work, you buy raffle tickets, you buy real estate in the town. On the one hand there's optimism that the next wave will conform to this pattern – *People say oh the Asians are buying everything, before it was the Italians. Another thing was they don't play sport. They said that about the Italians but now we couldn't have a football club without them.*<sup>18</sup> In this narrative each generation overcomes the prejudice of the past, with the buying of horticultural blocks as a signifier of that achievement. On the other hand there's nervousness that the pattern will not recur, *The Asians are buying businesses, but we*

<sup>13</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 20/8/06, conversation 7

<sup>14</sup> Maamaloa-Fine family, panel 3, *Migration Memories: Robinvale*.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Robinvale visitor responses, 24/6/07, conversation 1

<sup>17</sup> Robinvale visitor responses, 29/6/07, conversation 3

<sup>18</sup> Robinvale visitor responses, 24/6/07, conversation 1

*haven't seen them buying blocks yet. Tongans aren't buying blocks yet.*<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the pattern itself operates in terms of threat and exclusion. But amongst people who came to the exhibition there was a strong, even anxious desire, to not go with exclusionary storylines. Both long term residents and newcomers (particularly the Tongans) were keen to provide evidence of church and school initiatives to do otherwise.

One group that would seem to stand outside the Robinvale pattern of newcomer settlement are Indigenous people. Yet the Indigenous woman I worked with for the exhibition placed herself in this process. When I asked her what migration meant to her as an Aboriginal woman, she said that it was a process of becoming accepted.<sup>20</sup> This perhaps speaks to the strength of the discourse of gradual acceptance as a way of managing difference in the Robinvale context.

Groups and organisations don't play much of a role in Lightning Ridge but they are vital in Robinvale. They might hold people together in their own silos, but they might also facilitate bridging the gap. A man with soldier settler connections, saw the exhibition as *an eye-opener for a lot of people in Robinvale. We tend to stay with our own people.* And then he commented, *It's been a great move for the RSL to sell ANZAC day badges to the Cambodians and the Tongans, printed up in their own languages.*<sup>21</sup>

The common experience of both exhibitions which might be summarised as 'getting to know your neighbours/community in new ways' was shown and expressed in a variety of ways. Visitors often voiced their own memories in response to the personal stories. They asked each other questions and found information in the displays that extended their local knowledge. In Robinvale, the photo of the pickers' hut that Maamaloa's family had lived in, in the 1980s, was recognised as one on an Italian family's block, and also as one that had recently housed a Vietnamese family. In both places there were comments that suggested new connections. For instance in Robinvale, a comment on the Tongan story of the picker's hut was, *That was us in the 1950s!*<sup>22</sup> In Lightning Ridge one viewer saw a particular story as having *broken some barriers.*<sup>23</sup> At the Robinvale opening, a woman with a long term Aussie background struck up a conversation with the President of the Tongan Council who used the Tongan story to elaborate further on the journey of Tongans to Robinvale. The woman was clearly pleased to make this personal connection. In Lightning Ridge, some people experienced the exhibition as the place. *This is Lightning Ridge!*<sup>24</sup> In Robinvale one person saw the different stories in the exhibition as linked like beads in a necklace.<sup>25</sup>

What particularly interests me about these responses is that they connect with the **process** of being part of a locality, the **doing** of community, rather than a **description** of it. The doing involves questioning and connecting; possible storylines and possible scenes, emerging characters and shifting relationships. It suggests the flux of story

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<sup>19</sup> ibid

<sup>20</sup> Aunty Rose Kirby, interview 3.

<sup>21</sup> Robinvale visitor responses, 27/6/07, conversation 6

<sup>22</sup> Robinvale visitor responses, 25/6/07, conversation 2

<sup>23</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 2/9/06, conversation 6

<sup>24</sup> Lightning Ridge visitor responses, 21/8/06, conversation 1

<sup>25</sup> Robinvale visitor responses, 24/6/07, conversation 4

making and the idea that biography whether individual or collective, is always on the way.

### **Conclusion – landscape metaphors for the practice of cultural diversity (the picture of us)**

I've used material prompted by local personal histories to look at narratives and practices of locality in relation to the theme of cultural diversity. I've suggested that this material reflects established narratives **and** the ongoing making of 'us' as a locality. More implicitly I've worked with place itself as an important figure in the collective narrative. I want to finish with a 'portrait' of cultural diversity in each place I've discussed.

An experience of Lightning Ridge that stays with me is of driving through the opal fields at night. The whirr of generators is more a guide to habitation than light, and the radio tower in town is my best reference to direction along the intersecting maze of corrugated tracks. Each camp is a node in this network and each has its own less visible network of connections to other places. Belying their make-do form, these are live connections, conducting all sorts of exchanges. This is the scene of cultural diversity in Lightning Ridge: a horizontal network, dense, rough and ready, deceptive or tricky perhaps, but with the capacity to enable the most unlikely relationships.

In Robinvale by contrast the image is vertical – one of roots and growth. The value placed on settlement, on deep and long term contribution to the collective, suggests the threat of being supplanted. Cultural difference can stand for this threat and has frequently been constructed in this way, but many residents old and new, are out there with their tractors, trying to shift and mould its formation in their landscape. One of the strongest images for me of Robinvale is the sight of the Tongan brass band – the town's only band – playing the *Last Post* at the town's war memorial on Remembrance Day.

In both places however, these metaphors only partially include the historical and contemporary Indigenous position. This lack is dramatised by the fact that the most difficult relationship in the culturally diverse patina of each place is between the newcomers, including long term settlers, and Indigenous people. When they look for stories to guide them through this both past and current narratives are found wanting – Aunty Rose's use of migration as a process of acceptance, whatever its ironies, is an example of trying to find a story that connects rather than separates.<sup>26</sup> June and Roy Barker's interest in migration as an experience of both loss and capacity to move also seeks commonalities of experience across cultural difference.<sup>27</sup>

To return to the landscape metaphor, the signs of Indigenous presence in a place are essentially material; specifically related to the contours of the land, its vegetation and geology. They are not enmeshed in either the vertical or horizontal but scattered through both.

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<sup>26</sup> Aunty Rose interview 3

<sup>27</sup> Aunty June and Uncle Roy Barker display, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*.