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Avoiding it: Writing fiction about place without writing about it

Abstract:

Writing about place is not always writing what is 'real'. Writers often avoid specific, named and recognisable places in fiction – using literary devices and forms to write around them – and yet still manage to evoke a sense of place. In an exegetical reflection on my PhD novel, *Hovering*, this article explores my own journey in writing about my home town of Geelong by avoiding it. It discusses writing around place by employing an absurdist approach and explores how physical space intersects with virtual space in ways that invite formal modification and polyphony. The methodology I adopt is autoethnographic and mirrors my creative approach, but I also intersperse case studies of writers who have been central to my creative thesis, and who have represented place through defamiliarising strategies such as absurdism and disguise, multiplicity of individual perspectives and the voice of the crowd. Ultimately this article reflects on how we might write fiction about our places – our homes, towns, cities, streets; places that deserve to be seen; places that are tangible or virtual or a strange mixture of both – when we want to avoid reducing them.

Biographical note:

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Avoiding it

Geelong, a small city on the south-east coast of Australia, is the place I say I'm from. I've tried writing about it many times and have discarded every attempt. It's too close, perhaps, but my version of it is also boring. A little embarrassing. A failure. It's an industrial gateway to anywhere else, a bogan town, an unemployed town, a provincial town, a passing-through town, a town to escape. Instead I've written about non-places, made-up places, places I don't really know. I've set stories in the Pacific Northwest, in a nameless South, in cities that may as well be Geelong but which I refuse to name. It's not easy to understand why.

*

I'm either outside or in the classroom. The campus gleams with rain and fir and cedar. I think. The memories float and overlap and twist like clouds and it's difficult to say. The person I'm speaking to could be one of dozens. It might be sunny, but most of my memories of Vancouver are soaked, so it's unlikely. Someone is smoking. Or considering it. I say, or believe I say, 'I can only write about home when I'm away from it'. The person shrugs or nods or laughs and we move on to something else.

*

In the essay 'Suburbia' Helen Garner finds herself in Moonee Ponds in Melbourne, 'living in… "a suburb" – the very thing I had fled in 1961 when I left Geelong for Melbourne University, and had seen ever since as the emblem of everything I had despised' (Garner 2017: 457). She later reflects, almost apologetically, that 'I'm ashamed now of my bohemian contempt for the suburbs of my childhood, of my longing to be sophisticated' (2017: 458). I too fled a sad, recession-blasted Geelong for Melbourne University as soon as I could, hoping for sophistication to be magically bestowed on me. I'd argue that it wasn't, and unlike Garner – who left Geelong and never returned – I've always come back down the road to the red-ringed chimney of the oil refinery that marks the beginning of what we call Geelong.

*

I dream about Britain long before I live there. I see rolling green hills, ancient yew trees, hedgerows and lanes and stone fences and tea-stained brooks, villages and cobblestones and collapsed follies, crumbling castles overlooking valleys. To me it is mystical, a series of visions passed down through hazy genetic memory. Australia, the strange dry, flat country I was born in, had nothing to do with me. But the Britain I naively imagine, that has been passed down to me or I have conjured from my mother's favourite bucolic British television, isn't there. There's a moment, in Wales, next to an abandoned castle, as the sun kisses lush sheep-heavy fields, when I think: yes, maybe, maybe it was here. But the moment passes and the sun sets. Two years after I arrive, I spy a eucalyptus tree in Kew Gardens. It's the smell of it, its skinny, graceless arms, the way it disturbs the earth. It doesn't belong in this cold, damp soil, under this drab sky. It belongs to hard dirt and scrub, to brilliant blue skies and fierce southern oceans. I don't care what Samuel Johnson said. I'm tired of London, and that doesn't mean shit.

*

I've left home enough times to know what to expect when I return. At first I'm excited, delighted. Reunions are happy. There are uncanny moments in which the old, familiar places are briefly unrecognisable. Within days the patterns rearrange themselves. The place hasn't changed, not that much. But I have. The people, my friends, my family, have. Our paths have diverged and now, despite them reconverging, there's a different gauge, a different surface, an otherness. And the more the paths diverge, the more distant we become, even though we may only be small suburbs away from each other. I'm watching from the top of the boozy, smoky old outer at Kardinia Park, the local football ground, and the players play on.

In 2015 I arrived home following a few years in British Columbia. After years surrounded by

mountains, the sky was enormous. But the distances had grown further, and the unfamiliar familiar punctuated every move. I was glad to be home, I was annoyed to be home, I didn't know if it was home, and it was time to reckon with it.

But I didn't know how. My previous attempts had been awkward and swiftly abandoned. In dissecting the geographies of the nineteenth century European novel, Franco Moretti writes that 'cities can be random environments … and novels try as a rule to reduce randomness; this reduction … typically takes the form of a binary system' (Moretti 1998: 107) that simplifies the urban environment for the benefit of the reader. He goes on to discuss the reductions of class – particularly of the less privileged classes – in these novels. While the nature of the novel may have changed significantly since Balzac, Dickens and Austen, my discomfort in writing about Geelong directly was a wariness towards this kind of reduction. The tendency towards reductive, dualistic thought may be crucial to our survival as a species, but it 'can continue to exert an archaic hold on us beyond its usefulness if it prevents us from looking beyond the polarity of "opposites"' (Wood & Petriglieri 2005: 32). In narrative, it can deny the complexity of people, of places; it (as Moretti suggests) can diminish the experience of class, race, and gender. In writing about Henri Lefebvre and the reduction of the urban, Edward Soja claims that 'for Lefebvre, reductionism in all its forms … begins with the lure of binarism, the compacting of meaning into a closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts or elements' (Soja 1996: 60). Reduction distorts complex, multiplicitous, shifting environments into apparently neat, understandable spaces. In my case, when I tried to write about Geelong directly, I wrote it imperfectly, inaccurately, and unfairly. I reduced it. Or – perhaps more importantly – I could see that I did.

Contending with the problems of writing about place and cities in fiction is not new. As Burton Pike suggests, 'the city has been used as a rhetorical topos throughout the history of Western culture' (1996: 243). The difficulty – impossibility, perhaps – in faithfully representing a city, with all its complexities, has been faced by many fiction writers. From the Dublin of James Joyce, the London of Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens and Zadie Smith, the St Petersburg of Dostoevsky, the Venice of Italo Calvino, the California of Joan Didion, to the New York of too many to name, cities and places have been rendered in fiction many times by many people. Some, like Dickens perhaps, are celebrated as highly realistic impressions of the city. But Pike goes on to state that 'Dickens' London and London, England, are located in two different countries' that are 'parallel or analogous rather than identical' (1996: 246). In writing fiction about a city, there must always be a disconnect between the reality and the image. The writer brings to bear their own biases and contradictions. Even in works celebrated for their accuracy, representations of cities in literature can only give impressions, images, half-truths and slivers.

In the end, I wrote about my city by almost entirely avoiding it. As I will relate here, I found the answer in a painting, and the work and devices of writers who have written in ways that don't always confront directly. Writers who have sidestepped, often avoiding realist interpretations, but still managed to get to their thematic essence. This paper discusses several works that informed my practice during the composition of the creative artefact of my PhD thesis, a novel called *Hovering*, and how avoiding writing about Geelong by transforming it gave me the freedom to write about home.

Disguise

I wait for a meeting I don't want to attend. The painting on the wall is Geelong Capriccio *by Jan Senbergs. It's an aerial view of what Geelong might look like had it become the main city of Victoria instead of Melbourne. After being founded, the villages of Geelong and Melbourne grew at a similar pace. But in the early days of the Gold Rush, Melbourne interests distributed pamphlets to new arrivals claiming Melbourne was closer to Ballarat than Geelong (Houghton 2003: 8). It is not, was not even then, but the marketing worked. Hopeful prospectors sailed to Melbourne rather than Geelong. From Melbourne they went to Ballarat. The money went back and forth, and eventually Geelong became Sleepy Hollow, and Melbourne the briefly marvellous southern capital of the British Empire. But* Geelong Capriccio *offers an alternate history. In Corio Bay there are dockyards and dozens of piers. Skyscrapers line Moorabool, Yarra, and Gheringhap Streets. The rolling hills of the Bellarine Peninsula are lost to a sprawling city, with trams and high-rises at its edges. Ocean Grove is a bustling inner-city seaside town much like St Kilda. McKillop Street – now several lanes wide – goes through the city, out to Queenscliff, and continues over the bay on a bridge that leads to the Mornington Peninsula. In the distance: the You Yangs, the Dandenongs, and a small village called Melbourne at the northern edge of Port Phillip Bay that can barely be seen.*

It's not real. But I like it. Someone emerges from their office and calls my name.

*

An early strategy was to disguise what I was writing about. Disguise, whether through abstraction, absurdism, renaming or other techniques, is common enough in fiction, and offers a way for writers to confront difficult topics from a position of relative safety.

I was drawn to Vladimir Nabokov's alternate histories, particularly that of the Kingdom of Zembla in *Pale Fire*. Many of Nabokov's fictional places, for example, are inventions – kingdoms, empires, cities – set in an otherwise realistic world. In *Ada or Ardor* he superimposes existing places onto other existing places (McHale 2004: 19). According to Kelvin Knight, Nabokov suggested – if somewhat indirectly and obtusely – that this novel was his most biographical (Knight 2014: 106). In it, Nabokov renames space, reconfigures and disguises it in a fabulist novel to approach his own experience, if not confront it directly. Brian McHale suggests that Nabokov's world of Antiterra:

> has been constructed by superimposing Russia on the space occupied in our world by Canada and the United States, Britain on our France, Central Asia on European Russia, and so on. All of these geographical double-exposures are elaborately motivated: at the level of the fiction, by the science-fiction *topos* of the parallel world; at the level of the author's biography (which in a Nabokov text cannot be ruled out as an irrelevance), by the complex layering of cultures and homelands – Russia, England, France, the United States – that constituted Nabokov's personal experience. (McHale 2004: 47)

Nabokov's family fled Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution (Schiff 2019) and he remained an exile from his home for the rest of his life. Much of his fiction echoes feelings of displacement. Edward Said says 'much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for

disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule' (qtd in Knight 2014: 104). Knight suggests that the reconfiguration of space in the novels allows Nabokov to 'transcend, and compensate for, the negative effects of exile' (2014: 106). Nabokov often used these alternate spaces and histories to indirectly confront his traumatic past.

Similarly, an absurdist mode can disorient the narrative enough to disguise what is really being written about. In Julio Cortázar's *Casa Tomada* (*House Taken Over*), for example, two people fearfully realise their house is being gradually occupied by others as if they have just as much right to be there (Cortázar 1985). According to Brett Levinson, the story has been long regarded as a comment on Peronist politics (2004: 100). The danger of the political situation in Argentina at the time likely necessitated this abstraction. The absurdism of Moscow in *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov was, according to Urquhart, a 'strategy to resist censorship' (Urquhart 2015: 134). Bulgakov's work was not permitted to be published in his lifetime, and yet he continued to produce works that enabled him to critique Soviet society without facing the harsh consequences of direct, realist critique. Soviet science fiction is replete with examples of writers using the fantastical nature of the form to make bold – yet disguised – interpretations of life in the Soviet Union. Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *The Doomed City* – a work the authors deemed so dangerous as to keep it hidden until near the end of the Soviet regime (Gomel 1995: 99) – features a society that is part of a great dehumanising experiment. It's not difficult to draw a link between their fictional world and the Soviet Union of the 1970s.

Alternatively, the author might remove any reference to a real place altogether and write the non-place, 'spaces which are themselves not anthropological places and which … do not integrate the earlier places' (Augé 1995: 78). A novel's setting is perhaps an anchor, a foundation, allowing the reader/audience to be able to see the air and the earth and the people. Being precise about where a story takes place allows the writer to call on contemporary understanding of the location. They can assume their audience knows, at a basic level, the nature of London's streets, the sparkle of Sydney's harbour, or the enormous skyline of New York. But what if, for instance, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* took place in a car park in Nottingham? Would we not consider the history of Nottingham and wonder about the author's intentions – perhaps linking the ambiguous identity of Godot to a famous mob boss, corrupt politician, or media personality? Could setting fiction in a specific place sometimes make the audience miss the point?

Successors of Beckett's work, Lydia Davis's fictions are often placeless. Reading her stories might give us a sense we are in a general area: the north-east United States, perhaps, where it snows. There might be a lawn, and we are probably in the city, or at least some comfortable suburb. Davis's characters are usually nameless too. Xue Wei and Kate Rose state that in Lydia Davis's stories 'individuals are constantly facing a loss of Self; particularly in urban spaces, where they are troubled by a nameless and placeless situation from which they cannot escape' (Xue & Rose 2017: 39). Take, for instance, Davis's story 'City People', in which an unnamed couple move to an unnamed place in the country (Davis 2013: 315). The story is about one hundred words long, and while there are specific things – the characters, frogs, quail, mice, dogs, driveways, pumps – nothing is given a proper noun. This is a feature of much of Davis's fiction. In a 1999 interview, Davis stated:

> [S]ometimes I start by naming then take the name out. I try to name because I think, Why not? and end up taking it out again. By now, I think I understand why I would

> rather say “a large city in the East” than “New York”. You can see this large city whatever way you want. If you say “New York”, then you not only have to see New York in your mind’s eye, but you also have all these associations with New York – you think of the Big Apple, Sartre’s essay about New York, Radio City Music Hall. It often doesn't matter whether it’s New York City or San Diego or any other place – and then I’d rather leave it open like that. (Knight & Davis 1999: 549)

According to Xue and Rose, this placelessness and namelessness allows Davis to critique modern Western power structures by showing that:

> male-domination in postmodern society does not guarantee to women the freedom, of identity or of existence, that it seems to provide; the sources of oppression have only become less clear than in previous times. (Xue & Davis 2017: 44)

I’d add that, used as an authorial technique, Davis’s use of non-place allows her to write without her readers’ subjectivities and preconceived notions distracting them or reducing the setting.

*

I’m not oppressed, and I am no exile; I’ve left home often and have been fortunate to be able to do so. But my repeated departures and returns have led to a feeling of displacement, of feeling like I don’t know the place I’m supposed to know best.

In *Hovering*, the landscape is based on geographical reality, but the city is not. The ‘rules’ of the world are somewhere between Nabokov’s alternate histories, Bulgakov’s absurdities and Davis’s non-place. In this alternate reality, Fraser is located on the site of present-day Geelong. Melbourne does not exist. The bay is there, the river is there, the You Yangs still preside languidly at the northern edge – but instead of a small city, Fraser is a metropolis.

Circumventing these real-world links but retaining a sense of place – the land underneath it all – allowed me to explore Geelong from a distance. I could rename and reconfigure without fear. I could approach the city at a purely personal level, without getting bogged down in names of streets, people, and histories. The absurdity of the novel allowed something new to emerge from a place that had ceased to surprise me. I could look at the region with fresh eyes and imagine its possibilities and, occasionally, poke fun at its ridiculousness and dark, rarely acknowledged past. It allowed me to dismiss preconceived notions of Geelong and focus the reader’s attention on the story itself.

Writing place through disguise can allow us to move freely when we are constrained, either in real (political, social, physical) or imagined ways. The use of absurdity or alternate histories permits an exploration of what we conceive of as reality and the limits of space. I had the place, the city. But it was still a fixed, stable place – just a static backdrop for a satirical family drama. And no city is static. Disguising the city wasn’t quite enough. My difficulty in writing about Geelong also had something to do with the fact that a city, however humble, is impossible to contain.

Multiplicity

Cities are complex, shifting, plural and multidimensional. Cities exist in a 'real' sense, and yet what they constitute differs according to the individual, the moment, the location. Cities are subjectivities distorted by memory, mood, light, demography, disorder, chemicals and concrete. For Henri Lefebvre, in the urban space:

> anything can be a home, a place of convergence, a privileged site… [The urban is its occupants'] dream, their symbolised imaginary, represented in a multiplicity of ways – on maps, in the frenzy of encounters and meetings, in the enjoyment of speed "even in the city". (Lefebvre 2003: 39)

Cities are ideas; millions of sites from millions of angles that we group and call a single entity, onto which we apply our politics, prejudices, or aspirations. Maria Beville says, 'cities are unseen, they are fluid, unmappable and temporal; they are made up of hundreds of thousands of subjective urban experiences' (Beville 2013: 611). Thought of in this way, there is no such thing as a single city.

Moretti claims that 'most novels simplify the urban system' (1999: 107). This must be necessary to an extent. A system as complex as a city cannot be faithfully rendered in text, at least not in a way that would make for pleasant reading. Geelong, for me, is hundreds, thousands of cities that change according to moments in time, mood, economic prospects, or current levels of anxiety. I wanted my creative work to capture some of this multiplicity, this changeability, the ever-shifting, complicated and occasionally wondrous heterotopic space.

*

The city is a city of letters that have not been written.

The city has the best schools if you've got the right money.

The city is a city of rumours, of tunnels under the feet, of smugglers and illicit dealings.

The city is a city of commerce, of sheep and oil and wheat and cars and sawdust.

The city is a poisoned city, where signs at the water's edge still warn of cadmium and bathing in the sea after storms.

The city is an invasion.

The city is a city of dereliction and poverty, where jobs fall first and quickly, where smoke still pours from abandoned factories.

The city is a football team that cannot be dislodged from the front page.

The city is a fortress built to defend the whites from the blacks.

The city is a thousand Gary Abletts flying down the half-forward flank.

The city floats above the land, never quite touching it.

The city no longer contains reasons for me to return; no mother, no father, no brother, no sister.

The city is a gathering place, a feast, a gentle bay, a blood-deep first light of sun.

The city is only a way through, and if you stay, it is over, you are done.

The city is churches now nightclubs now offices now a 'heavenly development opportunity'.

The city transforms itself without understanding what has been.

*

Italo Calvino's much-discussed *Invisible Cities* (1997) embraces the multiplicity of cities. According to Beville, the novel 'evad[es] the real at all costs and revel[s] in the imaginary and the subjective which are central to the postmodern experience of the city' (2013: 610). The book describes fifty-five imaginary cities. Each city is being described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan as a place he has visited. It emerges that these are not distinct cities at all: they are a single city, Polo's home city of Venice, perhaps viewed from different angles.

Calvino composed each city distinctly and with 'considerable intervals between one piece and the next' (Calvino 1983: 37), suggesting that 'what emerged was a sort of diary which kept closely to my moods and reflections' (37). The unifying principle of the book – that of Polo and Khan and Venice – emerged only after Calvino had constructed many of the pieces. The resulting work features a single city as dozens of cities and yet, for Calvino personally, many of these cities don't refer to Venice at all, but to states of mind, other cities, 'the art exhibitions I visited, and discussions with friends' (38). For Calvino, 'the book was discussing and questioning itself at the same time it was being composed' (40).

In *Hovering*, the character of Alice returns home after fifteen years overseas. Her uncertainty about the city gives way to the absurdism of the city rearranging itself, seemingly uncomfortable in the space it occupies. It moves streets overnight, plants dozens of mailboxes in people's lawns, makes buildings disappear. Everyone in Fraser wakes up to a different city every morning. Everyone is uncertain about their own home. The city refuses all attempts at categorisation, to reduce it to something stable and understandable.

What begins as a seemingly normal Australian city becomes a place of impossibilities, where new cities play out in its self-transforming streets. Laws of physics are abandoned as the city reconfigures itself into pluralities. It becomes, briefly, a physical manifestation of the subjectivities that constitute the *idea* of the city.

Calvino's invisible cities reject 'a final and stable form, behav[ing] like maps without tracing' (Panigrahi 2014: 27). Kerstin Pilz has suggested that the novel's Kublai Khan wants Marco Polo to help him order his enormous empire – again, to reduce it, to categorise it, to make it comprehensible (2003). Yet Marco Polo is resistant, showing Khan through these unstable, shifting cities that what he seeks is impossible, that the world is disorder, instability and unknowability:

> Just as the Khan believes himself to have reached a sufficiently open, yet ordered

> model with which to represent the complexity of his empire, Polo draws his attention to the infinite nuances of information contained within the chessboard itself. (Pilz 2003: 232)

Pilz claims that the many Venices of *Invisible Cities* 'interests Calvino as a blueprint for a new topography that transcends dichotomies' (2003: 235), and positions cities as rhizomatic and infinitely connectable. She argues:

> the topography of Calvino's cities indicates that the real, even in the form of a man-made architecture, is resistant to rigid structuring. The layout of a city – the result of chance and a process of historical layering – is more akin to a naturally grown labyrinth like that of a rhizome. (Pilz 2003: 238)

Deleuze and Guattari, according to Pilz, aim to resist binary categorisation or dualism in favour of what they term 'arborescent' thought (Pilz 2003: 235). Similarly rejecting simplified categorisation of urban environments, Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace, built with strong reference to Borges' *The Aleph* (1998) and the work of Lefebvre, is a space in which the real and imagined come together in a way that is not reductive, but neither does it:

> derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a disordering, deconstruction and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalisation producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different… The third term … is not meant to stop at three … but to build further, to move on, to continuously expand the production of knowledge beyond what is presently known. (Soja 1996: 61)

Soja's Thirdspace struck me as a hopeful interpretation of the strange intersection between the real and imagined of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, and an idea I was echoing in addressing my own city.

In *Hovering*, the city of Fraser is a shifting labyrinth in which its characters must try to live normal lives. Inspired by Calvino's work and attempting to resist reduction, what began as a novel about Geelong became arborescent, growing branches and roots to become a novel about all the cities I'd been to. After some time, it became clear that I wasn't just writing about Geelong. I was writing about my relationship with where I come from, which is mostly a city and a region on the south-east coast of Australia, but also hundreds of other places. Fraser became a Thirdspace, where the real and imagined intersected and made something 'both similar and strikingly different' (Soja 1996: 61).

Whatever lens we choose, every city is millions of cities at any one time. Each view, each angle, each moment, each heterotopic site is as markedly different as each of Calvino's invisible cities. Cities and places are diverse and resist easy categorisation. In this light, the idea of a single, homogeneous notion or representation of a city seems improbable. I wanted my novel to celebrate the inherent multiplicity of place; to show that there is always something new, something surprising, something hopeful and irreducible in every place, no matter how well trodden; to revel in the unstable, fragmented, discontinuous and diverse. I'm hopeful that the absurdism of Fraser and its shifting, morphing streets approaches this.

I had the city, or, more appropriately, I had thousands of cities. Calvino wanted to see plural

fiction that captured, as he put it, 'a truth that was not merely partial' (Calvino 1988: 116-117). But Marco Polo was still only a single voice, and listening to a single voice relay their experience about a place may also be limiting. If I wanted to truly avoid reduction, I had to consider multiple voices. I wanted the crowd to speak.

Polyphony

#Geelong, a day in March:

[teenage girl with long hair staring vacantly in front of a wall]: follow [business name with leaves] she has something exciting in the works, watch this space [image: teenage girl with long hair staring vacantly in front of a tree].

[bee with a hat]: our lip balm is in a huge, massive, gigantic 25g size, we are super generous creating a lip balm this size for only $10.00, and only $1.00 for postage Australia wide. If you look at most lip balms they are normally under 5g (usually 4.3g) and usually charge $5-10 per balm. #dozensofhashtags then [image: lip balm, blue table, what looks like cliffs, impossibly blue sea].

[GREEN FONT, ALL CAPS]: this photo was sooooo good I just couldn't not post it [image: sloppy burgers with cheese and bacon and fried chicken and sauces and plenty of grease].

[Article about flat-earthers organising a trip to the edge of the world]

> *[Jill]: they havent got a research grant from the university hae they?*

[Paul]: I wonder what the underside of the planet looks like? I guess they have a name for it. Probably something like flat earth underbelly.

[Michael]: If the ice wall goes right around the world why do they have to go to Antarctica to find it? Does it only have a circumference of about 1 km surrounding the North Pole?

[George]: Go on tell me it's got something to do with climate change, give them time, and they probably got a Government Grant.

[Richard]: flat-earthers from around the globe are meeting … oh.

*

The ubiquity of internet media platforms – each aiming to extract and monetise our attention and data – in much of the world has ensured we are constantly engaging with the crowd, in ways that not that long ago, in the early 2000s perhaps, would have seemed ludicrous.

In fiction, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic novels – in which 'a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event' (Bakhtin 1984: 6) – has been commented on extensively. Bakhtin claims this polyphony allows Dostoevsky's characters to free themselves from 'authorial discourse' (7), thus broadening the novel from being primarily 'a vehicle for the author's own

ideological position' (7). Putting aside authorial intent and ideology, self-consciously and explicitly polyphonic novels – multi-voiced and featuring a variety of points of view, from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1999), to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (2004), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) – have been a popular way of representing the complexities of modernity since Dostoevsky. Calvino suggests that in modern literature 'what matters is not the enclosure of the work within a harmonious figure, but the centrifugal force produced by it – a plurality of languages, as a guarantee of a truth that is not merely partial' (Calvino 1988: 116). Although, as Mariano D'Ambrosio argues, whether the self-consciously polyphonic novel 'is a dominant trait of the fiction of our times is debatable', 'its permanent vitality … [is] a much-needed tool to grasp the complexity of the globalised, fractured, plural world we live in' (D'Ambrosio 2019: 31).

D'Ambrosio identifies recent examples such as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and Abrams and Dorst's *S.* (2013). But despite the ubiquity of social media and other internet platforms, popular polyphonic novels that fully engage with digital culture and its means of communication remain rare. The haphazard nature of the communication of the crowd – see any comments section or social media thread – resists what might be argued to be a primary motivation of fiction: to find meaning in the inexplicable. Even in this digital age, where more voices than ever can be heard all shouting at once, the novel of the crowd is a rare and often daunting sight, reserved for more experimental novels that do not worry the mainstream.

George Saunders' Booker Prize-winning *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) may be an exception. It is at once popular, experimental and polyphonic. Its extraordinary number of voices suggests that it goes beyond into something more like 'extra-polyphony'. It is the crowd of Twitter, of Instagram, of Reddit, made into a novel of historical fiction. To do this without becoming nonsensical it retains a central narrative – that of the afterlife of Abraham Lincoln's recently deceased son – and three main narrators, but employs dozens of narrators, each with their own versions and stories. As Merritt Moseley states:

> Saunders not only includes the historical sources; he not only mixes fictional ones among the authentic; he includes alongside each other sources that are at odds, sometimes factually and sometimes in interpretation. (Moseley 2019: 7)

During an interview with Tyler Moss, Saunders said of the composition of *Lincoln in the Bardo*:

> This book took me, in total, about twenty-something years to write. During the first sixteen of that, I was mostly just thinking about it and a little terrified of it, and also trying to avoid it. I would think, I'll do that Lincoln book, then I'd think, I don't know how to start. I guess the short answer to your question is: Structure is a way that allows you to do the things you're good at and avoid the things you're not so good at. (Saunders qtd in Moss 2018)

It could be argued that Saunders chose his polyphonic approach to avoid writing about what he wanted to write about – or at least, to write around it. And while I didn't think I could achieve the level of polyphony of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, it was approaching something that I was trying to get at.

*

[image of weeds, garden fence, dirt]: need help identifying a plant, my dog has hives

[image of car with bullet holes]: Someone fired shots at an UberEats driver in Geelong last night. Driver is safe.

[Boats, water, clouds]: This morning's sunrise :)

Greater Geelong Bike Rack locations

Does anyone know of any free street libraries (sorry not sure if that's the correct name) in Geelong and surrounds? Those ones ever you swap books . I have some books ,I'd like to donate.

*

The creative artefact of my PhD thesis was born in a time of a plurality that Calvino could scarcely have imagined: of many voices saying many things at once with many places to listen to them. Filtering the noise to a single location – *#Geelong*, for instance – doesn't help make sense of the noise. I wanted my thesis to capture something of our very loud and often very baffling moment, but in a way that reflected how we talk about our cities.

In *Hovering*, there are three main characters whose perspectives we move between in a third-person-limited POV. I wanted to ground the narrative early, but during composition decided this form wasn't enough. It needed a bigger perspective, a zoomed-out view. It needed to represent the kind of discontinuous narrative we now see every day on our screens.

Saunders' novel, with its newspaper excerpts and eyewitness accounts, seemed to get closer to Calvino's guarantee. I played around with short sketches of de-identified social media speak, forum comments, news articles and general internet media. When a key event occurs in the city, I wanted to see it through the eyes of the world. What emerged was a chapter told from the perspectives of dozens of characters as they simultaneously publish on their streams. While initially divergent, the messages begin to converge when what is happening to the city of Fraser is apparent. This chapter is intended toexpand the novel's resonance and breadth in a way that couldn't be done through the observations of three main characters without resorting to a more removed omniscient narrator. It is an attempt to capture our cacophonous digital moment in the eyes of its participants.

Taking cues from Saunders allowed the novel to explore the many voices of a city and represent digital culture meaningfully, while still remaining accessible. Rather than write about the event through the eyes of the main characters, I was able to expand the scope of the narrative without compromising the central story and, in doing so, avoid writing directly about what was happening to the city and drawing attention to its artificiality. There would be many moments, distinct and disconnected, which would serve to make up the whole. The fear of reducing Geelong I had at the beginning of the project was partly a concern about the authority of a single voice, whether it was my own or those of my main characters. This polyphonic approach allowed me to challenge my characters' perception of the city and

demonstrate a portion of the many different personal experiences that make up a city.

Confronting it

These tricks I have discussed don't erase the fact that I remain a single author with immense privilege. They don't suddenly allow me to account for the true diversity of lived experiences of place and they don't allow me to represent Geelong as it truly is: a place of hundreds of thousands, of First Nations peoples and everyone since; a place of contradictions, where one of the most privileged schools in the country stands in one of the most disadvantaged suburbs, a place that has seen its long manufacturing history disappear, replaced by new government buildings, a new library and arts centre and a UNESCO City of Design classification; a place where the word 'creative' is used liberally in marketing campaigns; a place of beaches and mansions and homelessness and wineries and shopping centres and conservatism and conservation; a place that cannot be contained. But these approaches have helped me get closer to what I observe, which is Geelong as I have seen it and felt it, as it was in time, in strange and difficult layers, of milk bars and mixed lollies, of long gone fountains and steep hills to roll down, of rivers and sea and schools and band rooms and horrid nightclubs, of long bus rides from school where I stared out at the fields and dreamed of being anywhere else, compressed moments that are impossible to fully contain. As Calvino says, 'Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a *combinatoria* of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined?' (1988: 124).

There are three images I thought about most when composing my novel. The first, as noted, is an image by Jan Senbergs called *Geelong Capriccio*, a painting of a modern Geelong if it, instead of Melbourne, had developed into the state's capital city. The second is an exaggerated and verdant image of the then small village of Geelong by Eugene Von Guerard, painted from the Ceres hills sometime in the mid-1800s. The third is a photo I took of the Melbourne skyline from the You Yangs, in which the haze appears to show the city floating above the flat, dry plain. For me, these distortions – if not outright lies – resonate more than any realistic image of Geelong.

In composing *Hovering*, I decided that the only way I could write about Geelong with any sense of authority was to write around it, as if I was writing from a distance. If I was to approach it directly, I felt the work would be incomplete, flawed, and too compressed in time and space. I could only approach it carefully, chip away at it, find it in echoes of absurdities and abstractions, in moments stretched out over years, in multiplicity, in the crowds of people who gather here and in other cities on other continents. My solution was to write a magical, shifting city that was not my city at all.

In the concluding pages of the novel, most of the city's population converge on the banks of the river. When I write these passages, I often walk alongside the real one it's based on: the Barwon River, curling through Geelong, with its muddy water, hidden corners, surprising islands; its lily pond, blue-tongue lizards, abandoned quarry, old pipes, and little canyons; its tiger snakes and heavy river gums. It is real, in a way that most of the novel is not. It is ancient, it has been known for millennia, it is not mine, it's beautiful and ugly, it's peaceful, it's both home and beyond my reach. It's a million places, all at once: implacable and stable and irreducible and sometimes breaking its banks; and with every new moment it is no longer what it was.

Maya Angelou said, 'You only are free when you realize you belong no place – you belong every place – no place at all' (qtd in Elliot 1989: 22). Perhaps this is true, perhaps not. Perhaps it is neither true nor false. We aren't trees; we don't have to settle for where we've sprouted. We move, we seek. To write about a single place as if it too can be contained, reduced – as if it is not somehow every place, or millions of versions of the same place – seems to me impossible. We bring to bear our movements, our biases, our layers. We make a map, and as soon as it is published it is out of date.

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