

# **‘Look what they done to this ground, girl!’: Country and Identity in Jeanine Leane’s *Purple Threads***

**HELENA KADMOS**  
Murdoch University

Of all the flowers in Nan’s garden I loved the bearded irises best of all . . . Nan used to call them flag lilies because of their billowy, showy heads that fluttered in the late spring winds. On wet November days, though, they reminded me of sad old ladies with a secret to tell. (Leane 50)

With this passage from *Purple Threads* (2011), Wiradjuri author Jeanine Leane tells us that her country, and the things that grow in it, fall on it and blow around it, are inextricably tied to her memories of her rural home and the women who raised her. Using the form of the short story cycle, Leane records some of the most significant of these stories which helped to shape her sense of personal and cultural identity as an Indigenous girl growing up in New South Wales in the late nineteen sixties and seventies. This article examines how the unique features of the form explore the complex relationships between people and country by articulating some of the experiences of Indigenous women and girls in a specific historical and social context in rural Australia.

Short story cycle is the term—out of many in circulation—that I have settled on to refer to collections of independent yet interrelated short narratives, whose individual stories can stand alone, although each is connected to the other in one or more of several ways. These connecting devices include common characters, focalisation, setting, repeated events, motifs or themes. When read together, the cycle as a whole produces richer, deeper meanings, exploring broader themes than the individual stories may have conjured on their own.

While the cycle has a literary heritage that reaches back into antiquity, and draws from oral traditions around the world, critical study of the form has been sporadic. James Nagel is one advocate of the form who claims that the unique function of the cycle is much overlooked. He points out, for instance, that many of the most important short story cycles of the late twentieth century were written by authors from a variety of ethnic backgrounds seeking to explore the complex interactions of gender, ethnicity, and individual identity. Focusing on cycles originating in the United States, he remarks that: ‘As “American” narratives, these stories often involve the process of immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, assimilation, identity formation, and the complexities of formulating a sense of self that incorporates the old world and the new . . .’ (15).

Extending Nagel’s findings, Karen Weekes argues that the short story cycle is a gendered form, reflecting the fragmented nature of women’s identity resulting from the diversification of their private and public roles brought about by greater opportunities following the peak of the women’s movement in the nineteen seventies. ‘Contemporary cycles,’ she says, ‘reflect this fragmentation of self in representations of the myriad roles a common protagonist plays’ (17). *Purple Threads* exemplifies both these claims. As a collection of stories about three generations

of women and girls, it provides rich material through which to explore multi-layered representations of women's lives in a variety of roles as wives, mothers, aunts, daughters, sisters, and neighbours, as bearers of knowledge, as teachers who are resourceful and resilient. Further, as a text by an Indigenous writer, based on her childhood in rural Australia, it articulates how the accumulative impact of significant experiences helps to shape her sense of personal and cultural identity.

*Purple Threads* is a collection of stories narrated by Sunny, a young Indigenous girl who, with her sister Star, is raised by her Nan and Aunties Boo and Bubby on the outskirts of Gundagai. These stories are linked by Sunny's narrative voice and point of view, common themes about belonging and identity, and a small ensemble of other characters. Most notable are the Aunties, richly drawn representations that remind readers of the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences. For instance, Auntie Boo is the feistier sister, a staunch realist who identifies with the women's movement, which is in full swing at the time the stories are set. Younger Auntie Bubby is a dreamer who buries herself in romantic novels. *Wuthering Heights* remains her favourite well into her old age. As independent texts, the different stories focus on isolated, pivotal experiences in Sunny's life and encourage the reader to reflect on how each has an impact on her, given her age and understanding at the time. When read together the interrelatedness of the stories shows how Sunny's racial and cultural identity changes as life experiences bring her into closer contact with people outside the immediate family unit. Her sense of self shifts as she learns that, in some people's eyes, her culture and ethnicity define her in negative terms that are used to justify her exclusion from mostly white social networks. In this way, both the independence and interrelatedness of these stories in the text work to dramatise many complex issues about identity.

While *Purple Threads* is ultimately a homage to these women who were so important in Leane's life, and also explores the child, Sunny's, developing awareness of her personal and cultural identity, Country, comprising both the physical and emotional landscapes in which these stories are set, is a significant presence in the book. In fact, the text teems with references to it, images of it, and stories about it. Its presence and influence is felt on almost every page. It provides a motif that runs through the stories as delicately as the strands of purple wisteria that are described on several occasions, and as powerfully as the Murrumbidgee River, which flows and then surges through the countryside. But it functions in more substantial ways as well: as a metaphor for the family who have legitimate historical and cultural claims to this land; as a force to be reckoned with and ignored at risk; as an anchoring device for the central character's personal journey as she experiences the pains and joys of leaving home and returning, and the developing awareness of her own individual and ethnic identity which these travels awaken in her. Further, even more than a metaphorical or symbolic relationship between identity and country, the book suggests an interpenetration, a literal meshing of bodies and land. We are told that the narrator 'was born into the purpleness of October' (Leane 51), that the earth should be so healthy it could be eaten (3), that people are taken away and returned to country, that an Auntie would rather 'lie down an' die . . . on the hill. An' bury myself so the crows won't get me . . .' (150) than suffer old age in the way her frail white neighbour does, neglected by family.

Nan and the Aunties are unequivocal about the right ways to treat other people, animals and the land, and confident that the earth provides what is needed at the right time. Their lives represent an ideal and thriving ecology involving relationships between themselves and the girls, their

extended family and neighbours, the animals and the earth. They show resilience and adaptability in responding to different cultural frameworks, reflecting both traditional Indigenous ontological understandings about country, and the western importance placed on individual property ownership. As such, these examples reflect remarks made by Paula Anca Farca, that ‘Indigenous women’s relationships to place reveal success stories in which they learn to heal, adapt, and carry on their traditions and create new ones’ (9–10). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the term ‘country’ does not mean the same thing to everyone, not least all Indigenous people. In many ways this is due to the often violent processes which severed many individuals and communities from their home countries and which, in some instances, can never be reversed. In other ways this reflects the continued urbanisation and ethnic diversity of Australian society in general. This diversity is reflected in the work of several scholars. For example, Yin Paradies, who identifies racially as Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian Australian, declares: ‘I do not speak an Aboriginal language, I do not have a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity . . .’ (358). Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Maggie Walter present a different view. They claim that ‘Indigenous people have developed their knowledge systems over millennia living on and alongside the land. Indigenous people’s knowledges are therefore predicated on societal relations with country’ (3). And non-Indigenous scholar, Anne Brewster, who has written extensively on Indigenous life writing, remarks that in his life-narrative, Kwini author Ambrose Chalarimeri theorises an Indigenous ontology of land that ‘reverses several western binaries, perhaps the most widely recognised instance of which is the notion that the land belongs to the people; in his formulation the land is primary and the people “belong” to it’ (‘Remembering’ 99). These disparate attitudes to country must be expected and respected, but *Purple Threads*, I believe, is grounded in what might be viewed as traditional Indigenous claims to country akin to the ideas expressed by Chalarimeri, Moreton-Robinson and Walter.

The rest of this paper examines how the multi-dimensional natures of country, identity and belonging are powerfully intertwined by drawing on two features of this short story cycle. The most salient of these, the interdependence and interrelatedness of the individual stories, shows how different aspects of country can be separately examined through discontinuously narrated events and how, through a cumulative reading of these events as part of the whole text, a stronger, richer picture builds of the complex, multifaceted ways that country and place—in actual and imaginative terms—help to shape and reflect an individual’s and community’s identity. The second feature is not so much a convention of the short story cycle that has been identified by critics of the form, but one that I have found present in many cycles, including *Purple Threads*. This feature is the longer story within the cycle. In some cycles there is, in the midst of the others, one story that is notably longer. I have found that in these stories the authors appear to be grappling with particularly complex themes which need the space of an expansive narrative to be developed properly, and that the cycle provides a space for these extended stories. In *Purple Threads*, that story is ‘Coming Home,’ and it provides a particularly rich opportunity to tease out Sunny’s attitudes to and relationships with her literal and figurative home and country.

### **Aspects of Country Treated through the Independence and Interrelatedness of the Stories**

Susan Garland Mann claims that the ‘one essential characteristic of the short story cycle . . . [is that] the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated’ (15), so that the reader’s successive experience of reading the cycle as it unfolds significantly modifies her reception of the individual

component parts (19). In *Purple Threads* the individual stories provide self-contained explorations of the women's understanding of, attitudes to, and relationships with country and home. As a whole, the cycle brings together these fragmented experiences, and country emerges as a foundational and consistent feature of very real importance in these women's lives. The following examples demonstrate how the short story cycle achieves this by highlighting different aspects of country explored in some individual stories, allowing the reader to draw these strands together to create a broader picture.

### *Country as source of knowledge*

The first story, 'Women and dogs in a working man's paradise,' introduces the reader to the central characters and sets the tone for the rest of the book. It opens with dialogue through which Auntie Boo passes comment on the impact of white settlement in the area. In doing so she establishes Indigenous epistemology as the authoritative source of knowledge in the text. She says: 'Bloody gammon ya know, girl! . . . Bloody farmer, stupid the whole damn lot of 'em' (Leane 1). On the following page she continues with a damning indictment on the environmental degradation that has occurred as a result of white farming practises: 'Look what they done to this ground, girl! Should be black an' beautiful jus' like ya could eat it! An look, girl. Jus' look at it . . . tired an' brown, what's left of it' (3). Author Kim Scott speaks about this process of grounding literature in Indigenous culture through dialogue as 'the very business of language retrieval [which is] a narrative of Aboriginal resilience, survival, potentially self-determination, sovereignty' (Scott n. pag.). Thus, in this way, the book's opening enacts sovereignty through Auntie Boo's claim to specific knowledge about country. Similar claims are made throughout the cycle. Often while out of doors and walking the hills or rescuing animals, commenting on white farming practices, or while planting and nurturing their garden, the women share experiences of the past, or knowledge and wisdom, which help Sunny deal with various difficulties she encounters while growing up Indigenous in rural Australia at that time.

### *Country as point of departure and return*

In the short story cycle there is often a sense of metaphorical and narrative circularity, which reflects movements away from and return to rest, not necessarily in the place of origin, but to the side of it. Jennifer Smith describes the movement in these terms:

. . . these volumes are not cyclical in the sense that they always begin and end in the same ways or that they go through symmetrical stages. . . . Rather, short-story cycles engage recursive, or cyclical, elements. A more accurate metaphor might be that of the helix, as the stories circle without exact repetition. The linking structures serve as axes around which the stories curve. (2–3)

In *Purple Threads*, these circular patterns are intimately connected to relationships, past and present, with family and place. For instance, in the story, 'Lilies of the field' (which contains plenty of seasonal and botanical language and imagery), Nan tells how her white husband, William, tried to force her to relinquish her cultural traditions with threats such as: '*. . . there'll be no talk of the past or heathen talk or superstitious mumbo-jumbo or I'll send you back to where you came from*' (Leane 43–44). He meant the place where she was working as a domestic servant when he met her, but that place was not her original home country. Ironically, Nan says:

‘Tell ya one thing, though! . . . I was born round here, on this country, bit further back from the river ‘tween two creeks, place called Murrumburrah . . . One thing I hafta say ‘bout William is he brought me home’ (44). In marrying her and bringing her from the place of employment to his farm, William had, in fact, already returned Nan to ‘where she came from.’

### *Country as refuge and protector*

The cyclical movement in this short story cycle is also reminiscent of the elemental forces of nature, which, along with the earth, are portrayed as seasonal and changing, but also enduring. The earth, and thus Nan and the Aunties, are seen to be reliable, so that even in extremes, from drought to flood, they can be counted on to provide. In the first story, Sunny writes about the Murrumbidgee River and the famous Prince Alfred Bridge, and the powerful floods that infrequently, but inevitably, come: ‘When the waters subsided, the carcasses of drowned stock hung high from the bridge poles and gum trees on the flat below. Missing persons reports were high. A car swept off the road near Gundagai could be carried some fifty odd miles all the way downstream to Wagga Wagga’ (Leane 3). This dramatic visual detail, placed early in the cycle, alerts the reader to the material and symbolic significance of the land and its changes, and to attend closely to the interactions between people and the land. In a later story, ‘Lying dogs,’ the floods do come with tragic consequences and the words from the first story are recalled with fresh meaning.

Set against dramatic changes in the weather, ‘Lying dogs’ illuminates the extreme lengths that the women, though far from prosperous themselves, will go to go to stand by others in need. The family develop a friendship with their young, white neighbour, Milli, without the knowledge of her violent and abusive husband whom she believes would forbid the contact. A flood that has been threatening for weeks finally comes, cutting their part of the countryside off from the town. During a particularly violent storm: ‘Thunder bounced between the peaks of the hills and made the plates on the dresser shake’ (Leane 121); Milli, bringing her two children with her, seeks refuge with the family. Sunny and Star are told that Milli’s husband has not returned home, and are forbidden to ask any further questions. Sunny says: ‘I said nothing about the blood on her [Milli’s] hands and face. Come to think of it, no one did’ (122). Even after Milli is washed and tucked into bed with her children, looking ‘like a ghost [in] one of Nan’s dresses’ Sunny senses a deep foreboding: ‘I thought for a while but something didn’t seem quite right’ (122). She is unsettled when she sees the Aunties dress in their raincoats and gumboots and leave the house with the wheelbarrow and shovel, and even more surprised to find them bathed and in fresh clothes when she wakes in the morning. But no explanation is provided and nothing more is said about the events of the night. The family remain isolated for weeks, during which time Nan and the Aunties care for Milli and the children. They feed and sew new clothes for the family, occupy the children, and eventually, when the waters subside, help Milli to deal with questions from the police about her husband’s disappearance.

This story is one of several in the book that portray Nan and the Aunties as compassionate women who connect with others across racial and cultural barriers. The treatment of this incident, however, in a stand-alone story, conveys an intensity befitting the extent of the Aunties’ aid to Milli. In the epilogue we learn that it was many years before the secrets of this night were divulged to Sunny. Milli’s husband had arrived home drunk that evening, and in a violent dispute with Milli, had been accidentally killed. The Aunties had risked their own freedom to deal with

the tragic outcome of this accident, turning to the earth and the powerful river to envelop and protect Milli's dark secret. As the images of the wheelbarrow and shovel are recalled and seen in a new light, Sunny ponders: 'The wild, wet weather served them well. That night, when I was pretending to be asleep and heard Aunty Boo say, *Let that lying dog sleep*, that's exactly what she meant' (Leane 154).

These reminders of the simultaneously ever-changing and enduring earth help to invoke the women too as survivors, as they outlive the patriarch William, and outlast the rest of their large family to remain on the land on which they were raised and to which they feel intimately connected. Similarly, the earth, and thus Nan and the Aunties, are shown as dependable, so that even in extreme circumstances, from drought to flood, they can be counted on to provide shelter and security.

### *Country as economic resource*

While the Aunties exude confidence in their legitimate traditional connections to their country, they also reveal a pragmatic acceptance that, in the male-centred and predominantly white-controlled world in which they live, patriarchal and western ideas about land and possession will secure them the right to live in a particular place and to call that place home. This is explored in several recollections throughout the book. We are told that in earlier years when William was still alive the women's lives were tightly controlled by their father and brothers, white employers and various institutional authorities. They were mostly confined to the home, the houses of the wealthy white families they served, and Sunday morning trips to church. But we are told that during the war Aunty Boo obtained her driver's licence, a victory that she recalls with pride at having skilfully persuaded her father to allow it: 'I buttered 'em up real good, I did. Thought about how I might go 'bout it fer a while. Had ta be careful ta make it sound like it was all fer their own good' (Leane 26). Of the freedom it gave the women to venture further a field, Boo says: 'Mum an' Petal, they got ta do things that none o' us ever dreamed of' (27).

These recollections hint at the narrow passage that some women, even today, feel they must navigate between working to obtain some gains for themselves, while not jeopardising those potential gains by drawing attention to any perceived lessening of male advantage in the process. In these stories Nan and the Aunties are shown to be aware of this fragile position and adept at performing the complex manoeuvres required to cross that space successfully. Most importantly, this is demonstrated in the story, 'Land grab,' during which the full story of how the Aunties obtained the title on the house is revealed.

The story opens on a hot afternoon with a bored, teenaged Sunny lazing on the veranda reflecting on the 'differences' that isolate her, literally and figuratively, on the fringes of the town. She complains,

'Stupid bloody land! . . . We could go ta town an' have a flash house . . . An' I could 'ave friends . . . an' . . . people would think we were *normal*.'

'It won't make any difference,' Star [responds] . . . 'People won't think we're normal no matta what we do. Get used to it.' (Leane 131)

The Aunties overhear this and are deeply hurt by the sentiments expressed. They decide it is time to tell the girls the full story of how they secured the home. They explain that in preparing for his death William presumed to leave his wife and unmarried daughters in the care of his son Richie, who Aunty Bubby claims was ‘never smart . . . All he wanted ta do was wait til the ol’ man died an’ sell the place’ (Leane 133–34). Knowing they would be out of a home, Aunty Boo intervened. She plotted and schemed, drew on her bookkeeping and masterful negotiation skills, and even practised forgery to manipulate her father into keeping the house and garden apart from the rest of the estate, thereby ensuring some future security for the unmarried sisters. Aunty Boo reveals that her knowledge of classical history provided the inspiration to carry out her plans. Referring to Emperor Augustus’ third wife, Livia, she says, ‘Like I kept tellin’ these two, if it’s good enough for Rome’s first lady ta change the Emperor’s will, then it’s good enough fer us. Future woulda been a whole lot different if I hadna. Someone’s gotta change history if it ain’t goin’ the right way’ (140).

These representations exemplify claims by some scholars, such as Tracey Bunda, that Indigenous women have had to be resourceful; what Bunda calls, ‘the subject black sovereign warrior woman as negotiator, fighter and nurturer’ (79). These are, in some ways too, unconventional representations of Indigenous women that the broader community may have not recognised in the past. As Jan Larbalestier claims: ‘Australians in general are profoundly ignorant of . . . the experiences of Aboriginal people in this country’ and Indigenous life writing can ‘challenge . . . the ways in which Aboriginality has been constituted in dominant “white” discourses’ (90). These, and other, aspects of the Aunties’ characters convey their flexibility and adaptability to draw from their traditional cultural heritage and other sources of knowledge to pull together all that they know as Indigenous women living in a colonised world to their best advantage. These representations function as examples of how, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin:

. . . the immensely prestigious and powerful imperial culture found itself appropriated in projects of counter-colonial resistance which drew upon the many different indigenous local and hybrid *processes* of self-determination to defy, erode and sometimes supplant the prodigious power of imperial cultural knowledge. (1)

Indeed, by mastering not only traditional Indigenous knowledge about the land and relationships, but also western historical, cultural and even horticultural knowledge and practices (through an extensive garden they cultivate), the women demonstrate these processes of appropriation and show themselves to be warriors who survive into very old age.

The twin importance of traditional connection to country—that is, a life spent literally living and dying on the land—and the white man’s piece of paper signifying ownership, is expressed movingly by Aunty Boo in the following excerpt:

‘So now youse know how I grabbed this little bit o’ land fer us an’ I won’t give it up, never. Ya’ll hafta carry me outta here in a box before I’ll be goin’ anywhere!’

‘Me too,’ Nan said.

‘An’ me.’ Aunty Bubby set her lips firmly.

[And Sunny thinks] All my visions of a house in town vanished out the window.  
(140)

Through the individual stories, different aspects of the women's attitude to and knowledge about country, land and belonging are variously examined. By bringing them together in a cycle, the reader successively pieces these separate accounts together and a richer, deeper understanding of the complex relationships between identity and place evolves. Another feature of this particular short story cycle, the longer story, explores these relationships in a different way. By providing a space within the cycle for themes of greater weight or significance to be dealt with in depth, the longer story reinforces and consolidates ideas about identity and place that have been developing in the stories preceding it.

### Country in the Longer Story within the Cycle

At approximately 12,000 words 'Coming home' stands out in this collection of relatively short stories. Placed in the middle of the text, after the reader has been introduced to the main characters and central themes comprising the book, this story functions as a pause from the episodic style and pace established thus far to allow a few significant themes to be developed in greater depth. One of these is the fundamental importance of the *knowledge* of home, which is more than the physical elements of roof and walls. It is the specific site where we feel we belong, physically and emotionally. bell hooks writes of 'homeplaces' in the African American context as subversive spaces because they were intentionally constructed as private, safe havens from white racist aggression (47), and they were the special domain of women: 'not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being, there we learned to have faith' (41). Anne Brewster has found the same sentiments expressed in Australian Indigenous women's narratives, where family (and home) become 'a site of resistance to a dominant culture which, both indirectly and directly, applies pressure to minority cultures in its midst to conform and assimilate to the dominant culture's codes and conventions' (*Reading* 1).

'Coming home' explores these notions of home as retreat from the interrogative gaze of white racist sentiment, and as the specific location, in traditional Indigenous terms, of the country where one belongs. Further, here as in other places in *Purple Threads*, are instances that unsettle stereotypes by reminding the reader that many Indigenous people have dual or multicultural heritages and, therefore, access (as with Aunty Boo and her knowledge of western classicism), to multiple sources of knowledge for making meaning. This story achieves this through its framing by a classic early twentieth-century narrative of a child's journey to a strange country, and her efforts to return home—*The Wizard of Oz*. At the beginning of the story Sunny is reading this book, her favourite at the time. There follows a series of images that evoke parallels with this familiar tale: the travelling circus and mysterious man (in the form of the rodeo and Sunny's cowboy father); the surprise of being whisked away from home; the weariness of a long journey and the terrors to be found in unfamiliar land, where women appear as witches and nothing is as it seems; and finally, the return.

In this story Sunny and Star are taken away from home and the women who raised them by their mother Petal—who drifts in and out of their lives—and their father Dinny, whom they have never

met before. They travel hundreds of miles to visit their white relatives where ‘the flat country was a haze of swaying grasses and massive, sparsely leafed reddish-black trees’ (Leane 75)—and where, unbelievably, there are no sheep. They are met by people they are told are family but who seem cold and unfamiliar. Of her father’s sister, a nun, Sunny says: ‘Sister Bernadette was the strangest looking woman I’d ever seen, story books and all. She was tiny with weird, red crinkly skin’ (70), and she asks her grandmother, ‘Who’s that funny lady dressed up like a witch?’ (69).

Sunny finds out-of-the way places to hide, where she can read her book or pretend to sleep, thereby protecting herself from the confusing attentions of her white family. On one of these occasions she overhears her grandmother use the word ‘Abo’ in disapproving tones. Sunny is uneasy about the unfamiliar term, the tone of voice with which it is uttered and the reactions the word arouses. For instance, trying to minimise his wife’s negative attitude towards Petal’s ethnicity, grandfather Paddy says, ‘She’s not a full-blood . . . She’s got some white in her. Looks to me like she’s less than half Abo. And the kids, you can hardly tell’ (Leane 74). On another occasion, Sister Bernadette is overheard saying to Grandma, ‘I can already see how we could do something with the children. They’re only young and they can be educated’ (78).

One can only imagine how confusing these conversations were for a young Indigenous girl in the rural outposts of the 1960s, and the struggle she must have had to absorb their full import. Eventually even Petal realises the risks involved in staying. She seeks the help of the local postie, Pete, a strange woman who ‘sat on the ground with the men near the front steps and smoked, drank tea and swore’ (Leane 84), but who, like the Great Wizard, recognises a desperate situation when she sees it: ‘Had enough, eh? . . . need to escape the Wild West?’ (89). While the rest of the family are out, Petal and the girls do escape, not in a hot air balloon, but in Pete’s ‘seedy smelling van’ (90). Once home, Sunny is overcome with relief. There, she understands the rules, can read the countryside and the weather, and is with people she knows love and accept her just as she is. It is where she belongs.

The longer story within this cycle provides the scope to develop more fully these key themes about home, homeplace and country, while also capturing Sunny’s particularly complex and personal journey as she becomes more aware of her place in wider, cross-cultural family structures, and what this means for her. In a passage echoing both Dorothy’s famous conclusion that ‘there is no place like home,’ and hooks’ claim that homecoming is bittersweet, ‘a constant reminder of white power and control’ (Leane 41), Sunny says:

My head was thumping with questions and stories about strangers and horses and cattle and peddlers and charlatans and prayers and dingo shooters and nuns and chores and Abos but I just wanted to sit back and eat as much as I wanted with my feet up on my chair and listen and laugh and fall into bed on the old club lounge by the kitchen window . . . (93)

We see reflected here, in the jumble of images and experiences swimming around in Sunny’s mind, the tension between ‘rational’ assumptions about what constitutes home—what is familiar and what is strange—and the visceral knowledge of home. The physical action and textural feel of falling onto the old club lounge tells Sunny that she has come back home as surely as any abstract knowledge of the fact.

## Conclusion

Country. Place. Belonging. Identity. These are concepts explored in a collection of independent stories about significant moments in a young girl's life, which build, one upon another, to create a deeper sense of the connections between a person's developing sense of self and the geographical, social and emotional places she inhabits. *Purple Threads* draws on country, in literal and figurative terms that conjure traditional epistemological understandings about people and the land and include the literal meshing of bodies and the earth, and the very different assumptions inherent in white settler social and legal structures. These ideas permeate the stories in the text, and are pondered, most eloquently, in the final passages of the book in which Sunny reflects on her Aunties' passing, ensuring that the text as a whole closes, as it began, with the physical and spiritual presence of Indigenous women on what, we are reminded, always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land:

When I go home now, I see the ghosts of the women who raised me. There's nobody walking the hills now but if I stare too long I see my Aunties. My sister sees the same ghosts I do. . . .

[We] scattered the ashes of the Aunties with Nan's under the granite shadow, on the royal green moss at Hannibal's House. We hope their unmarked site will be trodden by many children and their dogs. It's still a good place to dream while the country turns and turns. (156–57)

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