

SEEKING OTHER CENTRES

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European-Australian spirituality: how has it been represented over the last fifteen years or so by white Australian theologians and cultural commentators? The simplest way to answer this question is to look at the cover images on books about Australian theology, spirituality and the 'big questions'. The images which predominate are those of the desert and other unpeopled landscapes. Examples include Graeme Ferguson and John Chryssavgis's *The Desert is Alive*,¹ Muriel Porter's *Land of the Spirit*,² Cavan Brown's *Pilgrim Through This Barren Land*,³ Veronica Brady's *Caught in the Draught*,⁴ David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred*,⁵ Paul Davies' *The Big Questions*,⁶ Michael Goonan's *A Community of Exiles*,⁷ the 1998 RLA conference proceedings, *Spirit of Place: Source of the Sacred?*⁸ and, most recently, Peter Malone's *Developing an Australian Theology*.⁹ Looking at the covers of these books, it seems that not only is the divine absent

¹ Graeme Ferguson & John Chryssavgis (ed), *The Desert is Alive* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1990).

² Muriel Porter, *Land of the Spirit: The Australian Religious Experience* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

³ Cavan Brown, *Pilgrim Through This Barren Land* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1991).

⁴ Veronica Brady, *Caught in the Draught* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994).

⁵ David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred* (North Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1995).

⁶ Paul Davies, *The Big Questions* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1996).

⁷ Michael Goonan, *A Community of Exiles: Exploring Australian Spirituality* (Homebush: St Pauls Publications, 1996).

⁸ Michael Griffith & James Tulip (ed), *Spirit of Place: Source of the Sacred?* (Strathfield: Australian Catholic University, 1999).

⁹ Peter Malone (ed), *Developing an Australian Theology* (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 1999).

from the city and suburbs, but the Australian people themselves are irrelevant to the apprehension, formulation and recording of spiritual and religious experience.¹⁰

One could blame publishing houses and their designers for perpetuating the idea that mainstream Australian spirituality is a depersonalized affair, but it goes deeper than that, because the covers generally reflect the contents of the books. Most professional Australian theologians, up until recently, have been men, or have received their theological training in church-run, male-dominated institutions. When they write about Australian religion and spirituality, they tend to fall back on imagery which promotes the centrality of men in Australian life. The dominant Australian myth is the Myth of the Outback in which, as Kim Mahood has written, ‘the solitary hero scratches his iconography of heroic failure’.¹¹ This translates theologically into a solitary pilgrimage into uninhabited lands in search of the divine: matters of the heart and soul are symbolised by the desert, and ‘seeking the centre’ becomes the metaphor for the spiritual journey, often to the exclusion of other metaphors, other ways of experiencing the divine.

¹⁰ Limited use is also made of Indigenous motifs, as in *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* by the Rainbow Spirit Elders (Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1997), and Eugene Stockton’s *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Alexandria: E J Dwyer, 1995). Books by mainstream religious commentators which break with this depersonalized style of imagery are rare, and they are usually concerned with religious institutions: examples include Bruce Wilson’s *Can God Survive in Australia?* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1985) and Bruce Kaye’s book about Australian Anglicans, *A Church Without Walls: Being Anglican in Australia* (North Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1995), both of which feature photographs of city churches and pedestrians, and Roger C Thompson’s history, *Religion in Australia: A History*, with its cover-reproduction of Margaret Preston’s, ‘Christ turning the water into wine’ (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Kim Mahood, *Craft for a Dry Lake* (Milsons Point: Random House, 2000), p. 251.

The cover-art on books on religious and spiritual subjects by women is quite different, being comprised predominantly of archetypal, religious and secular images of women,¹² and images of women in verdant landscapes.¹³ Images of deserts are absent. Most of the women writing and editing these books are not professional theologians but are sympathetic to the ideas of feminist theology: their experiences and perspectives are influenced by the modern secular world and the way they talk about spirituality reflects this.

Sometimes I wonder if I am making an unnecessary fuss about the use of desert images to symbolise Australian spirituality. But then I remember that, while symbols express emotions and ideas, they also direct our way of thinking. Symbols construct our reality. And they are not value free: in the act of revealing, they conceal other, unwanted truths and protect vested interests. I am arguing that, not only is over-reliance on desert imagery evidence of the laziness of the collective imagination, but it also obscures alternative spiritual realities. Its proponents may be driven by fear of other truths, or maybe they are just unaware of contemporary realities. Whatever the cause, the

¹² Janet Nelson & Linda Walter, *Women of Spirit* (Canberra: St Mark's, 1989); Nora McManus, *A Remarkable Absence of Passion: Women Address the Catholic Church* (Brunswick: David Lovell Publishing, 1991); Morny Joy & Penelope Magee (ed), *Claiming our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars* (Wollstonecraft: AASR, 1994); Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A Lee & Joan Nowotny (ed), *Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology* (North

Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1995); Katharine Massam, *Sacred Threads: Catholic Spirituality in Australia 1922-1962* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996); Hilary Carey, *Believing in Australia: A Cultural History of Religion* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996); Mavis Rose, *Freedom From Sanctified Sexism* (MacGregor: Allira, 1996); Janet West, *Daughters of Freedom* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1997).

¹³ Ranjini Rebara & Michaela Richards, *Remembering the Future* (Brunswick: David Lovell, 1991). The most traditional bush-style cover (an Aboriginal adult and child in silhouette) appears on Anne Pattel-Gray's book, *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past Present Future* (Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1996).

pre-eminence of desert spirituality has worked to discourage or invalidate other voices, other points of view.

In this paper I want to bring to notice alternative expressions of white Australian spirituality, expressions which relate to the idea of relationship, whether it is relationship to the divine, to place, or to people. In doing this, I am drawing on books by women writers, primarily because women's experiences have been almost totally overlooked by mainstream theologians.¹⁴

The women to whom I am referring here were born in the twentieth century and their books have been published over the last forty or so years. I want to show that women have been addressing theological and spiritual issues for some time and that it is not a recent phenomenon – it is just that their voices have been ignored by mainstream theologians and cultural commentators. The ten authors, whose birth years range from 1915 to 1966, are Jessica Anderson,¹⁵ 'Criena Rohan',¹⁶ Elizabeth Harrower,¹⁷ Janette Turner Hospital,¹⁸ Helen Garner,¹⁹ Robyn Davidson,²⁰ Susan

¹⁴ See Elaine Lindsay, *Rewriting God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction* (Amsterdam/Atlanta GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000).

¹⁵ Jessica Anderson, b. 1915, *Tirra Lirra By the River* (1978) (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 1997).

¹⁶ 'Criena Rohan' (Deirdre Cash, 1925- 63), *Down By The Dockside* (1963) (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1985).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Harrower, b. 1928, *The Long Prospect* (1958) (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966).

¹⁸ Janette Turner Hospital, b. 1942, *Oyster* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1996).

¹⁹ Helen Garner, b. 1942, *Cosmo Cosmolino* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1992).

²⁰ Robyn Davidson, b. 1950, *Tracks* (1980) (London: Granada Publishing Ltd, special overseas edition, 1981).

Hawthorne,²¹ Kim Mahood,²² Eva Sallis,²³ and Nikki Gemmell.²⁴

Spirituality of Relationship

There is not time here to analyse individual books or develop a fully-fledged spirituality of relationship. Instead, I will talk about some of the ways in which women contribute to such a spirituality through their treatment of the divine and the way they see it manifest in places and people. I will finish by listing some of the effects that this spirituality could have on women and men and the expression of Australian spirituality and culture.

I am not claiming that every work of women's writing is a blueprint for a spirituality of relationship – what I am saying is that, across this range of books, there are enough examples of alternative spiritualities to challenge the dominance of desert spirituality and to support an argument that women are more interested in recording the multiplicity of ways in which the divine may be experienced than in 'seeking the (geographical) centre'.

I want to deal first with these women's references to God and/or the divine in order to establish that, in their writings, they are not celebrating the white Christian God of desert spirituality or the patriarchal and judgmental God that is often associated with institutionalised religion. Their preferred God is a personal God who brings comfort and strength to those in need.

It has to be said that these authors do not include essays on the nature of God in their books: they prefer to document

²¹ Susan Hawthorne, b. 1950, *The Falling Woman* (North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1992).

²² Mahood, *Craft for a Dry Lake*.

²³ Eva Sallis, b. 1964, *Hiam* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998).

²⁴ Nikki Gemmell, b. 1966 *Cleave* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1998).

encounters with the sacred instead of contemplating God in the abstract or investigating the theologies that have been constructed around the idea of God. What is notable in these books is the way in which encounters with the sacred take place outside of religious institutions, as if to say that God is everywhere and cannot be contained.

A striking example of this comes in Eva Sallis's novel *Hiam*. Hiam is an Arab-Australian woman who lives in Adelaide. Her daughter goes off with an Australian man, her husband kills himself and, distraught, she drives north into the desert. Somewhere south of Tennant Creek, she is comforted by a vision of the Blessed Prophet Muhammad (sic). She is not in a mosque at the time, but is, instead, out in the landscape. She is strengthened by the vision and drives on, reconciled to the fact that she does not know where she is going: 'God is the All-knowing. There is no God but God, and Mohammad [sic] is His prophet'.²⁵ At Tennant Creek she is blessed by a Sudanese-looking man, a local, who tells her she will find healing in the Green North of Australia, on the South Alligator River. Later, as she climbs the steep sides of a cliff to reach the waterfall on the South Alligator River she chants softly to herself: 'In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful / Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds...'. The waterfall can be read as a metaphor for God's goodness: the book ends with Hiam's re-birth and blessing. As she sits on the rock beside the source pool, she holds her open hand in the water and, as she does,

The water flowed inexhaustible and clear between her fingers. Then it settled, rolled, rippled infinitesimally and gently spilled and fell smoothly over the broad lip, its whisper building to a roar not far out of sight, dividing in an unending shout to columns, ropes, threads, drops and drifting mist. It danced its seamless

²⁵ *Hiam*, p.127.

measure without speed or hesitation. Her face was drenched from the drifting spray.

Lord of the two Easts, and Lord of the two Wests
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?²⁶

Not only is there a reluctance to associate the divine with man-made religious institutions, there is, in some of these books, an active suspicion of men who appear to ally themselves to the church. This dissociation between God, church and morality is illustrated in Nikki Gemmell's novel *Cleave*. Gemmell's chief male character, Bud, helped build the church outside Alice Springs and he attends mass regularly, but he's also completely self-centred. Some twenty years earlier, he had attacked his wife with a screwdriver to prevent her having any more children. He then fled inland, living a solitary life in order to avoid justice. He undergoes a conversion of sorts near the end, when he gives up on the church, saying that 'God is in his heart and in the land but not, for him, within the walls of a building'.²⁷ He tells his daughter that 'the wisest thing the Walpiri have taught him is that the family, not the individual, is society's basic unit'.²⁸ This knowledge, however, has come too late to him and he subsequently drowns himself off Tasmania.

Even in those communities where religion is bred in the bones, as in Criena Rohan's Port Melbourne enclave of Depression Catholics, the church does not figure as a place in which to encounter God. In *Down By The Dockside* the task of ministry is entrusted primarily to non-ordained people – Lisha's teacher, Sister Mary Angela, loves and cares for her students; the nuns at St Celestine's Hostel for Unemployed Catholic Girls are 'amazingly kind';²⁹ an

²⁶ *Hiam*, p.139.

²⁷ *Cleave*, p.357.

²⁸ *Cleave*, p.359.

²⁹ *Down by the Dockside*, p.116.

elderly woman comforts the recently widowed Lisha with the thought that 'God always leaves us with something';³⁰ and Lisha's Jewish employer assists her financially because, as he says, '...you are one of the ones who can build a home and look after their own. We who are like this must help each other'.³¹ Even death is portrayed as an occasion for community concern, with Rohan detailing the lying in state, rather than the funeral service. The priest is there, at the dead man's house, but so is everybody else, including the local Communist. The close-knit community is the primary source of comfort.

Most of these women writers are content to suggest that religion, as a man-made system of belief, rarely brings comfort, love or inspiration. Janette Turner Hospital, however, is adamant that man-made religion can become totally corrupt and corrupting. In her novel *Oyster* she tells what happens when a fundamentalist religious sect in an outback Queensland settlement is taken over by a self-styled prophet, Oyster, who staggers in from the desert spouting verses from the Book of Revelation. Only six people survive the mass murders and the conflagration Oyster instigates and four of these are women, including an Aboriginal woman who is in communion with the 'First Ones' and who knows that the town has been 'sung'.

It is worth noting that, in the books considered here, the authors do not try to overlay Christian meanings onto Aboriginal spirituality and they don't exploit Aboriginal imagery by using it to revivify Christianity. These women recognise that, even when they are invited to attend women's ceremonies, they will always be on the periphery, that Aboriginal spirituality will never be theirs. As Kim Mahood writes in her memoir, *Craft for a Dry Lake*, as she

³⁰ *Down by the Dockside*, p.181.

³¹ *Down by the Dockside*, p.236.

watches a sacred ceremony, ‘I am seeing the ancestors dance, but they are not my ancestors’.³²

There does seem to be a measure of appropriation going on, however, in Susan Hawthorne’s novel about woman-centred spirituality, *The Falling Woman*. Hawthorne sends two lesbian feminists out into the desert on holidays. One of the women, variously known as Estelle/Stella/Estella, keeps a journal in which she develops a ‘repertoire [sic] of stories and images’³³ about powerful women, drawing on myths from a number of cultures, including Greek, Minoan and Indian. She also incorporates Aboriginal-style imagery, presumably to demonstrate the universality of women’s spirituality. I am not comfortable with this, although it does raise the question, to what extent are non-Aborigines entitled to imbue the Australian landscape with their own spiritual meanings? Is the desert landscape the preserve of indigenous people, or is it available to be incorporated into anybody’s mythology? In the event, Estelle envisages Central Australia as an enormously powerful and sanctified landscape which is associated primarily with birthing women. The shape of the rocks, the caves, the watermarks and depressions are all reminders of pregnant women – there is no place for a male deity, Christian or otherwise.³⁴

As you may have gathered, it is impossible to talk about the divine in women’s writings without sliding into descriptions of place and people – God does not exist in isolation, but in relationship. There is a strong tradition in Australian women’s writing of the divine being manifest in the settled areas. Cities in particular can stimulate the spiritual awareness and sensitivities of women, most often through the beauty of gardens and waterscapes, and also

³² *Craft for a Dry Lake*, p.145.

³³ *The Falling Woman*, p.175.

³⁴ This association between the outback, women and fertility appears in more mundane form, too: Estella and Olga both start menstruating, as does Robyn Davidson and Gemmell’s Snip.

through the stimulation that comes when a diversity of people and cultures are gathered together.

In *The Long Prospect*, for example, Elizabeth Harrower transports her young heroine, Emily, from the industrial town of Ballowra (easily identifiable as Newcastle) to Sydney. Leaving behind a place of monotonous ugliness inhabited by narrow-minded people, Emily moves to a flat near Sydney Harbour with her parents. The following passage, from the last chapter, is indicative of Sydney's ability to liberate the female spirit:

Empty rowing boats anchored in the shallow water of the bay had all begun to swing round with the gentle force of the rising water. And the sun shone on their white-painted water-wet sides; on the occupied, incoming sea; on the tops of the trees; on the dull playing-field.

Soon it would be gone, soon it would be dark, but meantime the earth gave up earthy evening scents, dampness in spite of heat. Frail pink clouds feathered the translucent sky and Emily clutched at the stake and breathed the air, looked with unthinking eyes, was uplifted, transported, gave herself to the present beauty and the coming night. With cold smoothing hands the moment unfretted fear. She could have sung some wild wordless chant. In a trance she watched a bird soar homewards, disappear.³⁵

But it is not only in nature that reminders of the spiritual dimension of life appear. Houses are central to the lives of several of the key women characters in these books, the stable points around which they revolve. While houses can symbolise the isolation or entrapment of women, they can also exemplify women's attainment of spiritual understanding and social responsibility. A prime example

³⁵ *The Long Prospect*, pp.183-4.

of this is Helen Garner's *Sweetpea Mansions* in the novella *Cosmo Cosmolino*. At the beginning of the book Janet lives in grumpy isolation in a large, run-down house which had seen happier days when it was home for a collective household. As she is gradually forced out of her solitariness by the demands of two eccentric tenants, the house takes on a more cheerful aspect. Her final coming out of herself, her acceptance of the need to care about others, is expressed in her invitation to Ray and his brother to choose rooms for themselves in the house: *Sweetpea Mansions* can be seen to represent the biblical mansion of many rooms.

Houses can also be the site of intrusions by the spirit world into everyday life. Although intimations of the Other appear in most of Helen Garner's novels, sometimes signaled by a bird call, a gust of wind, a flood of sunshine, or an unexpected kindness, it is in *Cosmo Cosmolino* that these intimations can be construed as angels.³⁶ Garner herself is undecided about the literal reality of angels as messengers from God, conceding that some of the angels experienced by her characters may just be 'ordinary people perceived through a filter of intense need or intense distress'.³⁷ Such a position dissolves the barriers between the secular and the sacred by allowing the possibility of ongoing incarnation: the 'reality' of God's angels doesn't have to be proven one way or the other – Garner and her characters are content to live with the mystery.

Once I believed that the desert held little interest for women writers. I have modified this opinion in the light of a range of books published over the last twenty years. I think it can still be argued that deserts scarcely figure in the work of white Australian women writers born between

³⁶ For a more detailed treatment of Helen Garner's writings about the city, see Elaine Lindsay, 'The Dark. The Light. Helen Garner and the City', in *Women-Church* 27 (Spring 2000), pp.34-39.

³⁷ Helen Garner, in Eleanor Wachtel, 'I'm Writing to Save Myself': An Interview with Helen Garner', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, 10, (December 1993), p.65.

1901 and 1950 and that they do not think of them in terms of places to go in search of spiritual enlightenment.³⁸ However, since the 1980 publication of *Tracks*, Robyn Davidson's account of her camel trek across Central Australia to the Indian Ocean, there has been a rise in interest in the desert by women writers of fiction and non-fiction. Perhaps Davidson was the inspiration, or perhaps the ready availability of four-wheel drive vehicles can account for this 1990s exodus inland by writers including Susan Hawthorne, Kim Mahood, Eva Sallis and Nikki Gemmell.

I would still argue, nevertheless, that these women are doing something other than 'seeking the centre' as it is figured in mainstream desert spirituality. They have not been taken in by what Mahood calls 'the fantasy of a simplified ascetic life, free of attachment and the messy demands of relationships and responsibilities'.³⁹

The ultimate debunking of the link between the Australian desert and spirituality comes in Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster*. There is nothing purifying about the land in the far western reaches of Queensland where Hospital situates her opal mining town of Outer Maroo. The place is shrouded in 'a sort of mephitic fog ... that came and went like an exhalation of the arid earth itself'.⁴⁰ The residents call the fog 'Old Fuckatoo' and it stifles the town, its stink of dead cattle and rotting sheep a sign of the town's moral decay. The people who are drawn to such a place are not pilgrims – they are either mad or wicked. They admit themselves

³⁸ These writers include Eleanor Dark (1901), Dymphna Cusack (1902), Amy Witting (1918), Nene Gare (1919), Olga Masters (1919), Ruth Park (1923), Dorothy Hewett (1923), Jessica Anderson (1923), Thea Astley (1925), 'Criena Rohan' (1925), Elizabeth Harrower (1928), Barbara Hanrahan (1939), Marion Halligan (1940), Beverley Farmer (1941), Helen Garner (1942), Janette Turner Hospital (1942), and Margaret Barbalet (1949).

³⁹ *Craft for a Dry Lake*, p.198.

⁴⁰ *Oyster*, p.3.

that ‘nobody lives in a place like Outer Maroo unless he has things to hide’.⁴¹ They are paranoid in the extreme, fearing government, education, foreigners, Aboriginal land rights, conservation, the coastal cities, the ABC, the United Nations and changes to the Australian flag and constitution. They are ripe for takeover by an apocalyptic fundamentalist sect which teaches that ‘a satellite dish is the mouth of Satan, and television is his voice in your home’.⁴²

Hospital effectively reverses the trend amongst some theologians to picture the urban areas as manifestations of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Outer Maroo is destroyed the character who is the most pure of heart, aptly named Mercy Given, escapes in a four-wheel drive. The book ends thus:

Mercy drives always for the gap where Brisbane lies, Brisbane the beautiful, the city of dreams, the fabulous city of anecdotes, of her mother’s thousand and one embroidered tales, and she will bring her parents, she will go back for them, because I remember, Mercy, her mother says, how we used to drive down the range from Toowoomba when I was a girl, and I would imagine the city long before I could see it, and the sun would be all on the tall buildings, and on the glass windows, and it would be shining like the New Jerusalem, you know, in the Book of Revelation: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass.

And Mercy imagines Brisbane, the golden city. She imagines the great river with water in it. She thinks of grass, ferns, trees, ocean, sand. She imagines herself running into the ocean as into the world. She will let the world crest and froth about her.

⁴¹ *Oyster*, p.275.

⁴² *Oyster*, p.28.

She is driving back on to the map. She imagines that some qualitative change will occur. Perhaps the light will be different. Perhaps the pull of gravity will shift.

The Warrego Highway stretches ahead, and in the distance, always floating, beckoning, shifting, sometimes upside down, sometimes not, the golden city shimmers in the heat.⁴³

Hospital's book provides a strenuous rebuttal of white Australian attempts to link the desert with the sacred. It also indicates the ambivalence with which women approach the subject. This is confirmed by a reading of Robin Davidson's *Tracks*. Despite Davidson's repeated criticisms of romantic and/or mystical attitudes to the desert and her secular approach to the landscape, I suspect her book has achieved the status of a woman's spiritual classic.

Davidson is clear that she did not undertake her journey in order to find (or purge) her spiritual self: rather, she was bored with her life, its repetitions and her 'self-indulgent negativity'; she wished to 'know Aborigines more directly and simply',⁴⁴ and wanted to do something 'on my own without outside interference or help'.⁴⁵ She is determinedly pragmatic in her accounts of the trip and her changing perceptions of time and nature: her insights come from experience and Aboriginal teaching, not from divine enlightenment. Her new-found happiness is the result of trudging along, month after month, mentally dredging up her past: 'It was a giant cleansing of all the garbage and much that had accumulated in my brain, a gentle catharsis'.⁴⁶ Her feelings of connection with nature and

⁴³ *Oyster*, p.400.

⁴⁴ *Tracks*, pp.49-50.

⁴⁵ *Tracks*, p.89.

⁴⁶ *Tracks*, p.187.

landscape are part of her survival mechanism, not the result of a blinding flash of mystical insight:

And as I walked through that country, I was becoming involved with it in a most intense and yet not fully conscious way. The motions and patterns and connections of things became apparent on a gut level. I didn't just see the animal tracks, I knew them. I didn't just see the bird, I knew it in relationship to its actions and effects. My environment began to teach me about itself without my full awareness of the process. It became an animate being of which I was a part. In picking up a rock I could no longer simply say, 'This is a rock,' I could now say, 'This is part of a net,' or closer, 'This, which everything acts upon, acts.' When this way of thinking became ordinary for me, I too became lost in the net and the boundaries of myself stretched out for ever. [I]f you are fragmented and uncertain it is terrifying to find the boundaries of yourself melt. Survival in a desert, then, requires that you lose this fragmentation, and fast. It is not a mystical experience, or rather, it is dangerous to attach these sorts of words to it. They are too hackneyed and prone to misinterpretation. It is something that happens, that's all. Cause and effect. ... Capacity for survival may be the ability to be changed by environment.⁴⁷

What Davidson's book highlights is the difficulty of expressing the experience of personal change without resorting to the mystical. Nevertheless, she illustrates that it is possible to go into the desert in a secular frame of mind and come out changed, but still resolutely secular.

⁴⁷ *Tracks*, pp.190-1. This feeling of being absorbed into the landscape is a relatively common response to nature in women's writing and can be distinguished from the usual masculine response of wanting to tame or dominate nature.

Kim Mahood, in *Craft for a Dry Lake*, also writes from a secular point of view. Her father is killed in a helicopter crash and she feels impelled to revisit his old property, four hundred miles west of Alice Springs, in part to scatter some of his ashes and in part to free herself from the burden of his expectations, to live according to her own terms. Having grown up in Finke and Alice Springs, Mahood is well aware of the whitefellow mythologies that have been spun about the country, in particular the myth of redemption through a direct encounter with the spiritual source alone in the desert. She is not beguiled by this, and knows that it has little to do with Aboriginal spirituality for, as she points out,

... Aborigines rarely seek solitude in the landscape. For the most part they are thoroughly frightened by the notion of being alone in it. They have an infrastructure of beliefs and stories and prohibitions which weave them into the country, so that they are as enmeshed in it as they are enmeshed in family, so that they have obligations to it that are as powerful and of the same nature as obligations to family.⁴⁸

The only author in this study who makes explicit links between the desert and spirituality is Susan Hawthorne. It is worth re-stating that her book is an attempt to write Australia into a universal woman-centred mythology, which explains why the desert is generally shown as fruitful, like a garden full of wildlife and vegetation with

⁴⁸ *Craft for a Dry Lake*, p.252.

conveniently placed waterholes.⁴⁹ The desert is a source of sensual delight, bordering on the sexual.⁵⁰

In all of these books which deal with the desert, it is seen as a place to be passed through, not the final destination. Similarly, solitude is not a state to be aspired to. The women return to the cities where they have ongoing relationships that are central to life and spiritual well-being.

The ramifications of a spirituality of relationship

What are the potential effects of recognizing this spirituality of relationship? It would promote the fact that the bodies of women are sites of the sacred – not, as they have been cast by for centuries by misogynist theologians, as the sites of temptation and corruption. It would encourage Australian women to recognise and value their own spiritual experiences and to explore their spiritual traditions which have until now been obscured by desert spirituality. Women have yet to chart their own countries and tell their own stories.

⁴⁹ Not that this perception of the desert as fruitful is unusual in women's writing. In this vein Davidson, under the instruction of an Aboriginal companion, writes: 'Time melted – became meaningless. I don't think I have ever felt so good in my entire life. He made me notice things I had not noticed before – noises, tracks. And I began to see how it all fitted together. The land was not wild but tame, bountiful, benign, giving, as long as you knew how to see it, how to be part of it.' (p.174).

⁵⁰ Mahood, too, is aware of the sexual nature of the landscape: 'This impossible country, which leaves one stupefied with emptiness. It recedes and recedes beyond my grasp. At the same time it takes hold of me at the very centre and wrings me slowly and excruciatingly with a need and a desire which I cannot even identify, let alone assuage. People talk with such facility of its spirituality, but I have no idea what they mean. What I am feeling is physical, almost sexual. I want to scrape my flesh against the ragged bark of the boree, draw blood, crawl naked into the blinding stillness of the lake surface. So much Aboriginal myth and ritual is pervaded by a harsh sexuality. Genitals are slashed or penetrated with stones. The primordial landscape is scattered with the evidence of ancestral acts of rape, copulation, dismembering. It is about a physical encounter with the land itself, a wounding, a letting of blood, a taking of the country into oneself, of taking oneself into the country.' (pp.194-5).

By recognising that the divine is to be found in all things, the spirituality of relationship would encourage people to develop a deep sense of connection, whether it is to country or community, and to maintain this connection. The spirituality of relationship is not based on a once-off ‘desert experience’, but is lived continuously.

And what does the spirituality of relationship offer contemporary Australian theology and culture? The spirituality of relationship recognises that the centre is not the sole site of the sacred in Australia; rather it insists that the whole of creation is imbued by the sacred. In doing this, it overcomes the danger that everything that is outside of the centre is regarded as unworthy or potentially evil. In denying the primacy of a single approach to the sacred, it encourages the recognition of a diversity of spiritual and religious traditions.

In drawing its imagery from daily life, the spirituality of relationship incorporates the reality of the physical as well as the cerebral: that is, it values the body as both a site of the sacred and as the means of expressing the sacred, whether through childbirth, artistic creativity, or loving kindness. The language of this spirituality admits humour, anger, plain speaking, unvarnished reality, and an acceptance of contradictions. Its imagery is strongly sensual.

While respecting Aboriginal spiritualities, it discourages white appropriation of them, particularly when that appropriation is motivated by a desire for insight which is not supported by a willingness to fulfil the obligations to country and community which are an essential part of Aboriginal spiritualities.

The spirituality of relationship, while not invalidating desert spirituality, encourages people to seek out the sacred

in both their own lives and those of other people. It discourages people from becoming fixated on their own spiritual journey by stressing the need for relationship and working for the common good.

By promoting engagement with, rather than withdrawal from, the world, and by valuing communal salvation over individual salvation, it encourages social cohesion. In breaking down distinctions between the practical and the spiritual, it is a spirituality for the everyday.

And finally, the spirituality of relationship encourages the celebration of fruitfulness, nature, creativity, and community as well as the traditional masculine virtues of heroism, endurance and sacrifice. It recognises the value of contemplation as well as action. It expands mateship to include relationships with other people, with nature and, for those so inclined, with the divine. It does away with notions of the ‘dead heart’ of inland Australia and the adversarial relationship to nature that it implies. It calls us to recognise that the whole country sings with ‘spirit and community and family’.⁵¹

⁵¹ *Cleave*, p.314.