

## The subjective and experiential in research

My PhD research with creative work “Episodes on the Farm” looks at a series of ‘episodes’ in the microcosm of my own farm in Doreen, Nillumbik, within the northeastern green wedge of Melbourne (Wurundjeri Country). The episodes are at three scales: domestic (human need, infrastructure, and safety); agricultural (about farm animals, farm functioning, and enterprise); and altruistic (relating to the ‘other’ including wild species, places, and generations). In my creative work, the episodes use a range of literary and graphical techniques including narrative storytelling, sketch, and imagery to provide a subjective, emotional ‘experience’ of the situation to spark understanding and innovation.

My research is situated in a unique context where general concerns of environmental design intersect with domains of great personal and professional interest, on the edge of current landscape architecture practice. More than that, the project itself is deeply personal. The project is located upon and consists of the development for sustainable farming and wildlife habitat of my own land, farm, garden and home. In this built project, I am designer, action researcher, farm and project manager and



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*The author in her own ‘selfie’ during a work break on the farm 10 October 2017 [authors own]*

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frequently labourer/constructor. I am also client, wife, and mother, and the subject site is the only property I own. The success or failure of the project(s) generally and the wins and losses experienced along the way are deeply important to me. Far from an objective experiment with ‘neutral’ research methodology, my research is enmeshed within the context of my own life, work, and passion for environmental justice across species and generations.

Whereas positivism set out to explain and fully understand the world, changing tides in academia have seen growing support for subjective, contextual work. Feminist methodology rejects objectivity in research as an illusion<sup>1</sup>. Maynard, Harding, Franks and others advocate that it’s possible to achieve ‘objectivity’ by acknowledging researcher ‘standpoint, situatedness and positionality’.<sup>2</sup> Mason and Sharr embrace and encourage positional research and use the researcher’s ‘distinctive agency’ as a ‘vital and sustaining’, and fully declared, component of the work in their ‘Creative Practice Inquiry’ case studies<sup>3</sup>.



In some instances of my work, recorded in the PhD journal<sup>4</sup>, my work straddled a delicate

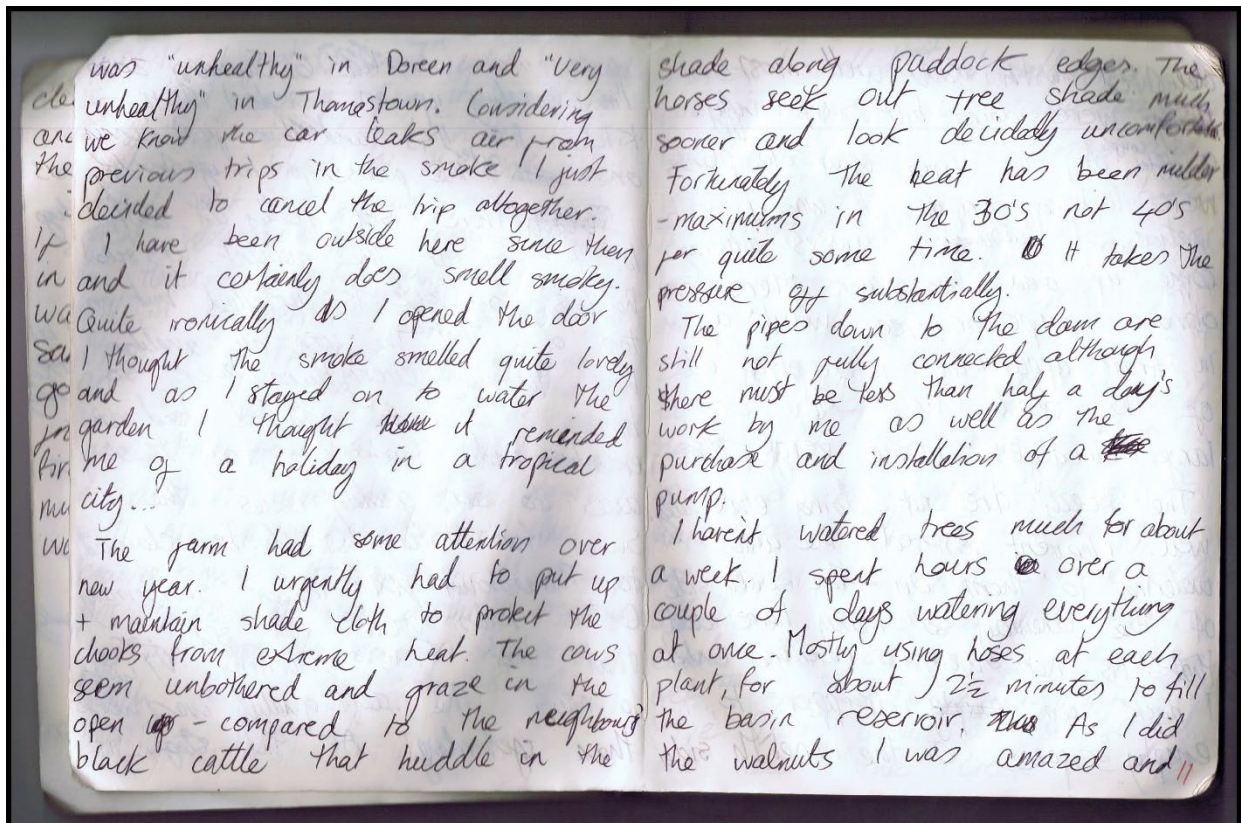
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*‘Nearmap’ aerial image of the unpermitted ‘cleanfill’ tip, prepared by the author 7 September 2020 to illustrate the vastness of the cleanfill tip and advocate for its closure.*

balance between designer/researcher and advocate/activist. In 2020, a ‘cleanfill tip’ opened immediately across the road, and directly upstream from, our farm. Drawing upon my landscape architectural understandings of land and water interactions, as well as graphics skills honed in practice and in my academic work, I produced a graphical and written site analysis report to demonstrate to stakeholders and government that the tip was not suitably sited. My older journal notes and access to the ‘Nearmap’ aerial photography portal through Melbourne University provided invaluable insights that I would not have otherwise had, allowing me to document and fight against destructive landscape change.



I went on to lead a community campaign against the tip, eventually giving evidence in two VCAT matters, and as key protagonist in media stories<sup>5</sup>. The closure of the cleanfill tip as agreed in a sealed agreement between the council, tip operator Earth Solutions Group, and landholder, was highly political and responsibility for the achievement is contested. Ultimately the specific covid time fight against this and a second nearby tip led to a change in the Nillumbik planning scheme to limit the importation of fill without a permit<sup>6</sup>. In this instance a specific site and specific impacts provided the evidence of damage and community concern in a way which generated broader conclusions about what was acceptable to the community within the local area and planning scheme.



Communication of research in ways that provide a subjective, emotional 'experience'

A scanned journal spread from early 2020, touching on the 'Black Summer' smoke, and preparations for extreme heat.

of the situation and processes to spark understanding and innovation is a further component of my work. This is in large part focused on the use of a series of illustrated narratives (stories) within each of the creative work chapters. Rather than limiting descriptions and moments to the precise and relevant "facts" these narratives explore the wider contemporary context to invite connection, shock and amusement, meaning and empathy.

The interest in dealing beyond specific pre-established questions or sets of fact deepens site and context specificity. In the deep, local, and specific, it might be possible to find the replicable and generalisable. In her 2007 creative works thesis Janet McGaw acknowledged the local (and typological) specificity of her own project, all the while highlighting its conceivably transformative potential by creating new intersections between fields of practice<sup>7</sup>. These might, after invention, mean something else. She cited the potential of the politics of her project to ripple out as a precedent. From narrative storytelling, 'discursive practices' used in forming stories, told in physical project and in accompanying text, there was scope for the creation of new meaning.

In his acclaimed work of creative non-fiction 'Underland', Professor of literature and environmental humanities Robert Macfarlane includes direct personal experience and a first person retelling. Macfarlane's work is not design but lays bare the physical manifestation of (hidden typologies of underground) landscape and the experiences of moving through this space. Like me, he is an active participant in the literal and metaphoric exploration of his subject. He does not hold back in including shocking detail and in sharing the impact of dangerous or difficult situations, as well as the ghastly and compelling spectre of climate (and other) catastrophe lurking in places<sup>8</sup>.

In "The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable"<sup>9</sup>, written in 2016 before he went on to write a work of fiction about climate change, Amitav Ghosh explored the cultural shortcomings that left us unable to sense the impending disaster of climate change. He wrote of the dearth of novels that deal with climate change even from authors known to be well informed about the topic. In parts of 'Underland' Macfarlane conveyed the same concern. His methodology to address the cultural inaccessibility of understanding, and feeling, knowledge was to engage deeply, viscerally and emotionally with the reader by the use of creative and generous non fiction narrative.

By exploring not only solutions but problems in an open ended, curious and engaging way in my creative work, I hope to contribute to the understanding of real world problems and explorations of their design solutions as situated, rich and deep understanding that provides a jumping off point for more and new innovation, perhaps even transformation.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Myfanwy Franks describes objectivity in feminist research as an unobtainable phantasm, partly because of the 'masculine' bias contained in the idea of objectivity. She suggests that the greatest rigour can be found only when unveiling normally unseen cultural and biographical aspects that permit the consideration of how 'background and domain assumptions and influences' could have influenced the research. Franks, Myfanwy. 2002. "Feminisms and Cross-Ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality -Developing Cross-Ideological Feminist Research." <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1601&context=jiws>.

<sup>2</sup> Maynard, Mary & June Purvis. 1994 (Eds.) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. Taylor & Francis; Harding, Sandra G. 1987. Introduction: Is there a feminist method?' in Harding, S (Ed.) *Feminism and Methodology : Social Science Issues*. Indiana University Press ; Franks, Myfanwy. 2002 (ibid).

<sup>3</sup> Mason, Ashley, and Adam Sharr. 2022. *Creative Practice Inquiry in Architecture*. Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> The 'journal' was a hybrid closely related to the design journal known in design practice, pedagogy and design research and a life record drawing loosely on the phenomenological research method used in healthcare research.

<sup>5</sup> Rolfe, Peter. 2020. Green Wedges are at Tipping Point, Herald Sun 20/07/2020, accessible at : <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/>

[calls-for-action-against-nightmare-landfill-dumps/news-story/0a26a4fc8e671b3bf2c398882eca4bc9](https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/calls-for-action-against-nightmare-landfill-dumps/news-story/0a26a4fc8e671b3bf2c398882eca4bc9) ; Rolfe, Peter. 2020. Green Wedge Dumps, Herald Sun 20/08/2020 (not online); ABC Radio Mornings with Virginia Trioli, Fri 28 Aug 2020, 8:30am ABC Melbourne Radio 774; VCAT matter 1553/2020 Nillumbik SC v Gulli. 2022. VCAT 4 (5 January 2022), <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/vic/VCAT/2022/4.html>; VCAT matter 1564/2020 (settled, unpublished) 774

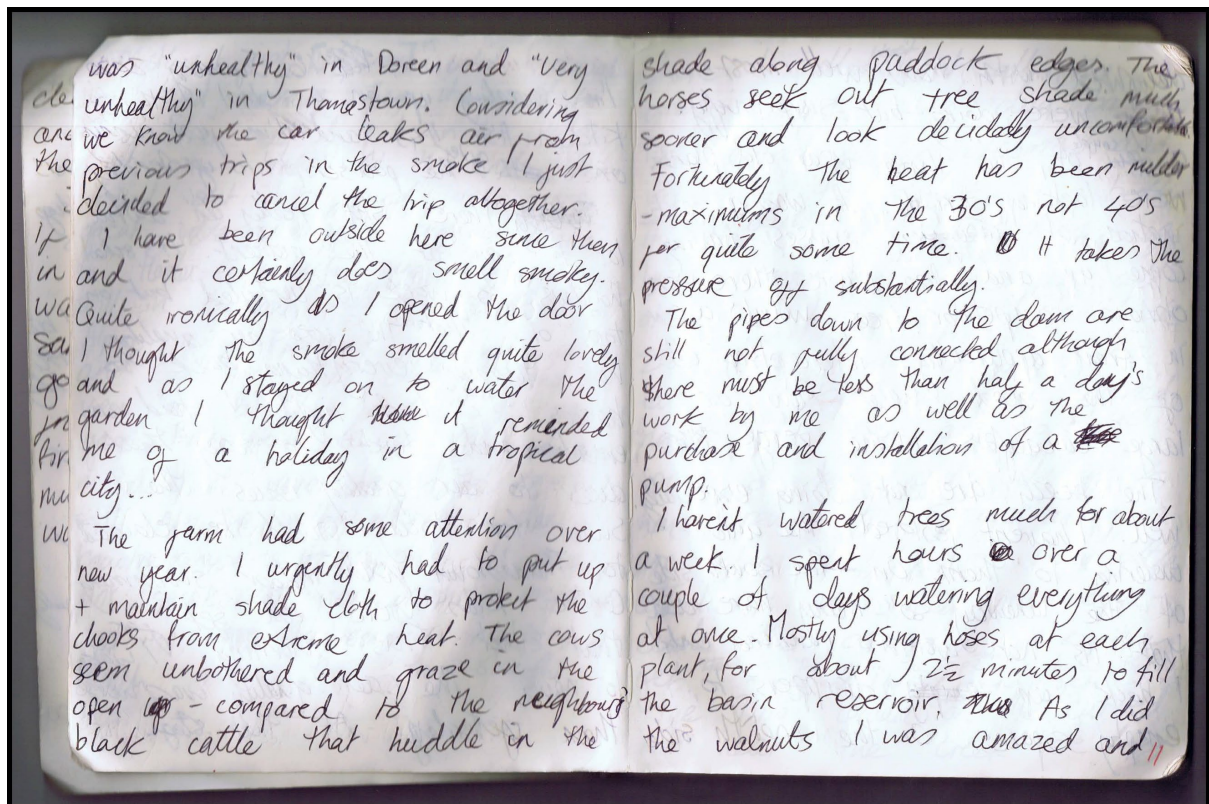
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au/Council/News-and-publications/Latest-news/Greater-controls-over-clean-fill-dumping-in-Green-Wedge>

<sup>7</sup> McGaw, Janet K. 2007. *Urban Threads* (PhD Thesis)

<sup>8</sup> Macfarlane, Robert. 2020. *Underland: A deep time journey*. W W Norton. See also: The Guardian. 2019. What Lies beneath: Robert Macfarlane Travels 'Underland. April 20. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/20/what-lies-beneath-robert-macfarlane>.; Letcher-Nicholls, Thomas M. 202. *Unbearable Brightness: A Study of Enchantment in Alice Oswald and Robert Macfarlane* (Masters Thesis)

<sup>9</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The University of Chicago Press. See also Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. Amitav Ghosh: Where Is the Fiction about Climate Change?. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/amitav-ghosh-where-is-the-fiction-about-climate-change-> .; Karnad, Raghu. 2016. Why We Do Not Hear the Waters: Amitav Ghosh's 'Great Derangement.' The Wire. July 12, 2016. <https://thewire.in/books/why-we-do-not-hear-the-waters-amitav-ghosh-great-derangement> .

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The 'journal' was a hybrid of a design journal known in design practice, pedagogy and design research and a life record drawing loosely on Max Van Manen's phenomenological research method used in healthcare research. This entry from 8 January 2020 dealt with noxious bushfire smoke, protection from extreme heat for animals, and construction progress for water infrastructure.

Sarah Hunter is a landscape architect with experience working in Australia and the UK. She is convinced that design can play a critical role in solving the wicked problems of the world. Sarah is interested in understanding and leveraging subjective experience, emotion, and perspective to achieve change and make the world a better place.