

## **Tripping Over Feathers: Beginning a Biography of Janaka Wiradjuri (Joy Williams)**

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It's not fair, Pete. If I start crying I'll never stop. I never will. Sometimes I'm so frightened of dropping a cup. Or tripping over a feather. Because if I trip I can't [get up], I can't do it. And they're not going to take me out of the world like that.

Doretta Williams was born in Cowra NSW in 1920, of the Wiradjuri Aboriginal people. At the age of seven she and two sisters were removed from their mother and placed in the Cootamundra Training Home for Aboriginal Girls. At the age of sixteen she was sent into domestic service and in 1942 she began working as a housemaid in North Sydney at a Rest and Recreation establishment for soldiers. On 1 January 1943 she fell pregnant to a soldier of the Sixth Division. Her daughter Eileen, later known as Joy, was born in September. Three weeks later Eileen was taken to the Bomaderry Children's Home managed by the Aboriginal Inland Mission. When Joy was four, in part due to overcrowding in the Home, the Bomaderry matron asked that she be transferred to the Lutanda Home managed by the Plymouth Brethren. There Joy grew up. When she was about twelve, she was told that she was of Aboriginal descent. Isolated, and aggressive and believing herself unattractive, Joy had a sad and lonely upbringing.

On leaving Lutanda at seventeen she began training as a nurse. Drifting, or drawn, to Kings Cross she became a sex worker, drug addict and a member of the Rosaleen Norton cult of paganism. Several convictions for sex working and petty crime were followed by a twelve months sentence in which the judge made a Court Order allowing her, if she wished, to attend a psychiatric hospital instead of jail. Between 1959 and 1961 she was admitted, or admitted herself, seven or eight

times for treatment. A child Julianne was born to her and adopted to become the third successive Stolen Generation child. Joy returned to Kings Cross to drugs and prostitution, but also now to take part in political movements such as helping to organise the Freedom Ride, sit-ins, Green-Bans and the struggle to close the maximum-security prison Kotingal. In 1973 she met her mother who came briefly to live with her, but through Doretta's drinking, Joy herself became an alcoholic. Through Doretta also she met her Wiradjuri family and, while never returning to Cowra, 'became' an Aboriginal in the full sense of knowing who she was, and was recognized as such by the inner-city Aboriginal community. Hoping for something better than Kings Cross (and also, perhaps, to avoid a compulsory Alcoholics Anonymous attendance order) she moved with her son Ben to Nowra 150km south of Sydney. In the early 1980s she contacted Stolen Generations Link Up to reunite her with her Cowra family. Oomera Edwards, Co-Ordinator, and I, at that time Link-Up's only two staff, took her to Cowra to introduce her to her family. Though Joy returned later for several months, her relations were not close. Feeling herself exploited by some Erambie residents, she never returned after 1990. Remaining in Wollongong, sober but still addicted to drugs, she held a number of professional positions in Aboriginal health organizations. She completed a BA and in 1991, an MA, specialising in creative literature. She began a passionate and long lasting affair with a married man.

In the 1990s she began a court case against the Aborigines Welfare Board and the State of New South Wales alleging that at Lutanda she had been denied bonding attachment and so developed Borderline Personality Disorder and a propensity to substance abuse. A long series of hearings culminated in 2001 in the High Court of Australia's dismissal of an Application for Leave to Appeal against the NSW Court of Appeal's decision not to find against the judgement on the principal claims.<sup>111</sup> That is to say, she lost comprehensively.

At about the same time Joy asked me to write her biography. We completed some fifteen hours of taped conversation and I began reading the very extensive biographical materials which had been gathered for the Hearings. Though troubled by many health problems, her last few years were the most fulfilling. Now known by the community as Auntie Joy, she lived in a flat owned by the Aboriginal corporation, was a senior member of Stolen Generations Link Up Governing Body and an elder of the Wollongong community, proudly free of all illegal drugs, alcohol and medications, and widely respected both for her poetry and her failed court case. In 2006 she died. She is buried on top of Doretta in Narooma Cemetery, where her mother had spent most of her life. I resolved then to begin the biography which had for various reasons stalled in the previous three years.

The first difficulty is my inevitably limited understanding of the circumstances of her life. It is true that I have some 2000 pages of biographical material, two books of poetry, 100,000 words of transcribed interviews of Joy and other members of her family, any number of people whom I can now interview, and twenty five years of friendship with her. It is true also that I have spent most of my academic life reading archives about, interviewing and working closely with Aboriginal people, especially the Stolen Generations'. But I am not a woman or an Aboriginal. I have not had a child adopted, or been removed from my family. I have never been unloved or thought myself unattractive, been institutionalised, or held in jail or mental hospitals, been a sex worker, or a poet, an alcoholic or a drug addict, attempted suicide; I have never sued anybody or lived on the streets. Can I ever know enough about Joy to write a biography? Does the fact that you *like* writing biography make you a better better biographer? Does one need to get inside the mind or feelings of one's subject? I plan to circulate the biography manuscript to half a dozen people who shared these experiences, and who knew her well, and incorporate their comments into the final draft.

The second problem is that a significant member of Joy's family has insisted that the existence of this person be not acknowledged in the biography in any way whatsoever. I understand the reasons for this request and respect them. I must therefore find a way to avoid mentioning this person while remaining true to Joy herself. Interested in the 'Scenes From A Life' method of biographical writing since completing my *Charles Perkins A Biography*, I believe that such a structure will enable me to omit that person in a way that a full biography could not faithfully do.<sup>112</sup> Let me discuss some possible scenes from her life and the issues involved in each.

### **North Sydney, 1942: five months before Joy's birth**

At the main Hearing, discussion took place before the Judge as to whether Joy had been forcibly removed from her mother, so to become a classic Stolen Generations matter. No documentary could be produced by either plaintiff or defender.

Early in the Hearing this exchange took place:

HIS HONOUR It is correct to say that [Mr Hutley, Williams's lawyer] does not maintain that this particular plaintiff, to use the expression, is a member of the stolen generation, whatever that expression might mean. Is that correct?

ADAMSON: Quite, your Honour. The plaintiff's primary case is that the plaintiff's mother made an application to the Board under s7(2). ...

HIS HONOUR Because the plaintiff's case is that her mother surrendered control of the child to the Board.

ADAMSON Yes, pursuant to an application. ...

HIS HONOUR: And in fact it is done at her behest.

ADAMSON: At the plaintiff's mother's request, quite, your Honour.

HIS HONOUR: Am I also correct in saying that the plaintiff's case is not that the Board in any way sought to remove the child, but that the mother requested the Board to take control of the child, for reasons best known to the mother?

ADAMSON Yes, that's right and it appears that that occurred on or about 12 October 1942. (9-12)

No doubt Joy's lawyers decided that the case for her wrongful removal as a stolen child, in the total absence of records, could not be sustained. The judge made this determination:

The primary submission [for Williams] was that there was no unlawful removal detention or taking of the plaintiff at any time and that there was no factual removal of the plaintiff in the sense of her having been 'stolen'. If there was a removal, or taking it was pursuant to the mother's request for the Board to do so. She applied or asked the Board to take control of the plaintiff and the Board acceded to her application.

It is certainly possible, and I believe it probable, that a good deal of moral pressure was placed on Doretta to relinquish her child, backed by the assurance that the Aborigines Welfare Board had the power to remove Joy from her in any case, should she resist. In this first scene I will recreate an alternative hypothesis. The Board's Child Welfare Irene English Officer receives a call from Joy's employer that Doretta is late for work, often is found sitting down, has become withdrawn, and seems a little plump around the middle! Mrs English visits Doretta, ascertains that she is pregnant, admonishes her, explains the impossibility of keeping her child.

### **Lutanda, 1955**

The second scene should take place at Lutanda itself. These were the years most crucial to the Hearing. Her legal team had to establish that Joy had both experienced and manifested psychological disturbance (namely, Borderline Personality Disorder) during those years and, more generally, that the Aborigines Welfare Board had abdicated its fiduciary duty in not monitoring her mental health

while she was an inmate.<sup>113</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s Joy claimed physical and sexual abuse as well as psychological: being beaten with a strap, being made to stand naked in a corner, having her collarbone broken by being thrown against a wall, and being injected with a sedative. She also made these claims to me in an interview, but at trial her lawyers conceded that such abuse probably had not occurred; rather, her claims were in themselves a potent demonstration of serious mental disorder.

Joy also claimed that she learned of her Aboriginal descent only when it was thrown at her in anger by a Lutanda official when she was 12 – that Doretta did not want her, she was Aboriginal and a drunk. Joy too, she was told, had ‘mud in her veins’. Her Court Statement of 1994 read :

Joy was told that she was such an ugly baby that her mother had given her away and been sterilised. She was also told that her mother was a drunk. She said she ‘nearly died of shame’ when she found out that she was Aboriginal, and for a time tried to cover her face with her long hair.<sup>114</sup>

Many hours were spent at trial determining whether the staff knew that Joy was Aboriginal, and if they did, whether this knowledge had contributed to her deteriorating psychological state. Most of the surviving staff and some of the former inmates denied they knew. At least one staff member, however, knew. She told two interviewers working for Joy’s legal team:

Did [Joy] got on well with the other children?

Yes, she seemed to get on all right with the other children. But if there was any trouble you knew that Joy would be at the bottom of it?

Did you know that Joy was an Aborigine?

Joy wasn’t very Aboriginal. Her father was white. But we didn’t know who he was or who her mother was. No relations ever came to the home to see Joy. We tried to find out what happened to her. We suspected that her mother had abandoned her as a baby. The records said she was Aboriginal but let’s face it they are different to us. You could tell from looking at her. They live in filth, don’t they? They never get rid of it, it’s there and it’s there for good. What would she have been like if she had been brought up on a reserve? ... It’s not nice reading in the paper all of these lies. She’s trying to get herself money. Because it was the Aboriginal in her.

This unrecorded statement, whose sentiments are so bitterly familiar to Aboriginal people (and historians), was allegedly made by a former staff member, and compiled from notes made by the two interviewers. It was rejected by the Court as not a true record.

This second scene I envisage taking place on the day that Joy was angrily informed that her mother was Aboriginal and that like her, Joy had ‘mud in her veins’.

### **Kings Cross, 1960**

One of the more bizarre of the scenes from Joy’s life will take place in Kings Cross, then the most Bohemian centre of Australian life and one of the most disreputable. The elements I need to weave into the narrative include sex working for money, sex work for affection, constant changes of abode, minor crimes like burglary, arrest and imprisonment, amphetamine addiction, social activism such as the campaign to save inner-city housing, being raped by police, constructive social work for the Aboriginal Freedom Ride and the drop-in centre the wayside Chapel, her first encounters with public speaking, poetry and folk-singing, the stirrings of a positive recognition of her Aboriginality, the search for her mother, and overall the excitement and novelty of Kings Cross for drop-outs like herself. These were some of her memories:

So I was living at the Cross, homeless most of the time, in flophouses and so on. That’s where I met Koori women. Flophouses, 6d a night or nothing, it depends on who had the money. A little group of us would sleep on floors, girls and boys, all homeless, long before the Cross became a drug centre. Or bus stops, I remember I used to sleep at the Darlinghurst Fire Station. Rape was the order of the day usually too. When I used to pick up blokes for a room for the night, that’s all it was, that’s all it was for. You couldn’t say no.

Pretty bad memories? Yes they are. Very traumatic memories. A social worker, missing most of this, reported after interviewing her,

This girl was seen at the above Clinic on 30<sup>th</sup> August. Joy seemed to have a resigned attitude, which at times gives way to the underlying resentment about her illegitimacy and lack of home and relations and her won lack of success and self-esteem. She has little motive or hope for constructive satisfaction. Her own discontentment and emotional problems seem to have interfered with

adjustment in employment. ... She gave as her Vocational Choice live-in domestic work in the country. This may be a possibility, if she is placed in a home where standards are not too high and class distinction not too obvious. She needs the help of an adult who can give her genuine interest and understanding. She may have some artistic talent (drawing or music) or interest that could give her satisfaction. [1960]

Yet there is another side to her life at this time. Joy was to an extent involved with a pagan cult conducted by the artist Rosaleen Norton, known as the 'witch of Kings Cross'. Artistically Norman Lindsay's bacchanalian creations were among her inspirations. Her paintings appeared on many café walls, while her followers sometimes appeared in grotesque masks on the streets. She fostered a cult of artistic, though not entirely serious, paganism complete with demonology, bestiality, satyrs and fauns, black masses and erotic drawings. Joy was reluctant to discuss this part of her life, and following that lead I did not ask her much about it. But I think that Joy, very much more intelligent, musical and artistic than the health workers were aware was drawn to the excitement and naughtiness of it all. I have reason to think she took it more seriously than many of the other adherents of the cult.

I am therefore pondering a scene involving Norton which will encapsulate many of the other elements of her Kings Cross life. Norton's pagan rituals seem a much more constructive and lively way of presenting Joy's life in Kings Cross than one based, for instance, on the interview which produced the report of 30 August above.

### **North Ryde Psychiatric Centre, 1962**

Joy attended psychiatric centres eight times over two years, on many occasions signing herself in voluntarily. I envisage a scene set during one of Joy's periods in the early 1960s.

An important element in psychotherapeutic thinking was known colloquially as Confrontation Therapy, in which a group of half a dozen inmates, attended by a psychiatric nurse, discussed the issues and problems of one member of the group. Joy found these, she told me, very destructive, 'You went in feeling good, everyone would ask you questions, and you'd come out feeling rotten'.

After each session the official would write notes on each individual. Typical entries for Joy run

5 July 1963 Stated in Group that she was under 'hypnotic influences' and that a male friend had hypnotized her... the group suggested that she have sedation, which was given'

31 May 1964 ...would like to have a special group before she is discharged. Said she wanted the group to 'dig deep'' and to 'get stuck into me'. Joy claimed she would answer any questions that the group asked.

16 July 1964. In small group strongly indicated she would take her own life after 4 September. Is very depressed by the loss of her daughter born on above date and who was adopted out.

5 August 1964. Appeared very depressed this morning in big group. Joy feels her talents aren't fully appreciated as the group felt that she didn't write the ward note she presented.

The issues which she confronted in Group and Small Group recurred again and again: her frequent wrist-slashing (which she admitted were intended more for attention than suicide), her relationship with her husband Kevin, the future of Julie-Anne, her feelings of ugliness and self-hatred, her attempts to find work outside that was not sex work. This was the entry for the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1962:

Kevin and she came to group. Julie-Anne discussed. Joy described her daughter as being 'shuttled back and forth like a raffle ticket. 'Joy has no affection for the baby, it can be adopted or a foster home or something - !'. Kevin says he is certainly not going to care for it either. ...There was a general verbal attack on the parents for the shocking neglect of the child!...Joy says she 'bitterly regretted' marrying him.

After more research in 1960s psychiatric practice, and possibly some interviews with former psychiatric nurses, I hope to recreate a small group session in which the issues in her life at this time will be explored by other inmates in as realistic a manner as I can manage. One of the difficulties will be to reproduce the changing emotions which Joy exhibited through many sessions: threatening suicide, finding a new job, ambivalence about her relationships, and most important in her later life, her tempestuous relationship with her baby both in the womb and until years after her adoption. Did she agree to her baby's adoption? The records suggest a medication-induced affirmative. Joy told me in a formal interview that such was the state of her mind then, she could not be sure what really had happened. 'I get



confused about what's written in the hospital notes and what I know. It twists your mind. Is that colonisation?' Many years later, after being reunited with Julie-Anne, she wrote this poem to her:

### **Poem for Julie-Anne**

My arms are empty, but at least I know  
I gave you life and I gave you a name.  
Though your skin is fair don't be shamed.  
Julie-Anne, Julie-Anne, I didn't give you away!

### **Meeting Doretta, Nowra, 1973**

The judge also found that the plaintiff's mother at no time between 1942 and 1960 made application to the Board to have her daughter released to her care. Technically that was true. After 150 years of psychological as well as physical colonization, very few Aborigines had the self confidence or the knowledge to engage a lawyer to make application to recover their removed children. It was much more common, though, for parents to write to the Board requesting information on their whereabouts, or their return. Doretta did so, too. In 1956, when Joy was fourteen, Doretta wrote to the Child Welfare Officer in which she asked, among other points, "And could you please tell me if I could go and visit my daughter as I would like to see her." Irene English replied: "I was quite surprised to hear from you, and often wondered what had become of you." Followed some sentences about how to manage a medical bill from the Condobolin Hospital, she wrote "With all good wishes to you, Dora, for this coming year, and thanking you for your Christmas greeting." English had answered each of the several points of Dora's letter: except one.

Several times in the early 1970s Joy had been told that Doretta was living near Narooma, on the south coast of New South Wales. In 1972 she sent a mother's day card to the post office. The following year Joy met a *Herald* journalist who agreed to take her to Narooma. There she asked the whites – not the Blacks! – where Doretta lived: it seemed she used to live with Jimmy Little, (the father of the well-known singer) on a property owned by a Ken Richards. Old Jimmy had died but Doretta had been allowed to stay on in the tin hut if she helped to pick the beans and potatoes. Peering through the window, Joy could see her Mother's Day card above the fireplace. Why had Doretta not contacted her, she wondered. But she wasn't there. She was in hospital in Nowra. Back they tracked, stayed in a pub overnight. Next morning, 'all prettied up' Joy asked the matron if they could see Doretta.

- Hello Eileen

- Hello Mum

Her mother's first action was to slap her and ask why she had not come back to visit her earlier. In the course of conversation all day Joy learned that she had been found behind the Bodalla pub suffering from alcohol poisoning, Alzheimers, malnutrition and neglect. Joy's recollections of the time are among the saddest in here life:

I still find it hard to talk about mum. Part of me still believes what the Home said, that she didn't want me. And yet the majority knows that it isn't true. The big majority of me. ... If she had not been a drinker I might not have been one either. I didn't drink much before I met Mum. When I brought home my first bottle of booze, I got into a better mood where I could handle my mother, and when she was drunk she seemed to be more accepting of me. And I [kept on] drinking when Mum came to live with us too. With Mum, drinking developed into a competition I think. And when we got into it we started being loving to each other. Maybe the only time we were ever close.

The scene I imagine will take place either meeting Doretta, or perhaps during a drinking session during which, in Joy's memory, Doretta resolutely refused to reveal anything of her past.

### **Kangaroo Valley, 1982**

At the same time Joy was in the midst of the second passionate affair in her life. Her lover, married at the time, has agreed to discuss the relationship with me, and I shall do this shortly. The affair was important, not least because it drew from Joy her finest poetry. While most of the works in her two books of poetry are heartfelt but a little predictable, it was in the following poem that she rose to unclichéed high passion, subtlety, lyricism, technical assurance and concision.

### **Kangaroo Valley Man**

This is the best of the half dozen poems dedicated to him.  
 Next time you're making love in the morning and  
 I know you love to make love the same night  
 Anyway, next time you make love to your wife or your  
 Lovers, remember, I'll be there!  
 I may be there as the proverbial fly on the wall  
 Or moulded in with the folds of your Sheridan sheets,

Perhaps I'll be there as part of the sunshine streaming  
 Into the room or watching by the glow of moonlight.  
 Be assured, dear heart, just get this message quite clear  
 I might be content (for now, patient, sweetheart)  
 To remain in the space for you've allocated for me in your life –  
 But I'm gonna come roaring right back into your soul  
 Just when you least expect me. (Aha!!)...  
 You never said I was frigid and I know I  
 Ain't got the body of a twenty-five year old  
 Saint! (or did you say nun?)  
 But, listen, my darling, can you hear my soul screaming?  
 Did you enjoy our drives out to La Perouse beach with  
 Loud military music that made you feel like the man you've  
 Always wanted to be – of yes, and with Jenny!  
 I've heard it said that you like my legs,  
 And I've heard it said that you know that I love you and  
 (Oh yes, what's the big deal about age fifty five?)  
 Should I drink Scotch and maybe cheap rum to  
 Encourage your kisses? Bugger the smoking!)  
 One day I'll have millions and I'll build you your  
 Fireplace and give you 'nice' tiles for your bathroom  
 Made in Italy, of course! – have huge cedar beams  
 Let's see, what else is written on your wife's list?  
 Oh yes, thank you for your 'thoughtful sex'  
 (Gord, what the hell's that?)  
 I know you prefer our imaginative passion!  
 You 'look good' to the public and lie to our children.  
 Oh, I believe you when you say your life is not easy!  
 Cause just let me tell you, dear heart, neither is mine!  
 I ain't got no French design label jumpers –  
 I never needed clothes from you  
 I only ever needed you.

I shall perhaps set this scene during one of the lovers' conversations.

### **Erambie Aboriginal Station, 1985**

In 1985, following the establishment of Link Up in 1981, and through the widening network of her extended family met through Doretta, Joy decided to return to her Erambie, near Cowra in central New South Wales. Her intention was to meet her many first and second cousins and further to embed her Aboriginality in real places and real relationships. It was from Erambie that so many of her family had been taken, over several generations, though the policy of child removal.

In the book Joy will need a passage in her own words. Unfortunately the interviews that Joy and I made in 2000-2, when Joy was taking marijuana (and possibly other substances), are rather incoherent. The following interview was made much earlier by Oomera Edwards and I in 1986, just a year after she had returned to Erambie, for a book of the experiences of 'Link-Uppers'.<sup>115</sup> Though, unknown to us, she was drinking heavily, her memories and reflections were lucid and sharp. This passage reveals also the courage which the Stolen Generation members need to return to their communities after a lifetime of negative propaganda against every aspect of their Aboriginality.

You never forget [the trip home]. Never forget it. Oh God, even just down to Canberra. That wasn't too bad, because I was still more or less in my territory. I thought, yeah, I can get off at Bateman's Bay and just come back. I knew the whole thing was going to be different. There's not much in my life, there's not very much that I've finished, but this I was determined to. Because I had had enough – I hate the word 'consciousness raising', but I've had enough of that to know that my children had a right to their family.. Even if I didn't have the right, my children did. Even if it [Erambie mission] is RS, and even if it doesn't live up to my expectations, that's where I'm going.

Saw Coral [Oomera Edwards] at the bus station, that was reassuring. Going back to her flat, that was nice. No, it was better than nice. It was lovely. Nice and calming. I remember I was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof. And that carpet. I'm surprised if there is any left of it. Just talking to Coral for hours and hours, and I was delaying. Delaying the inevitable too. Hoping the morning would never come. Desperately hoping the morning would never come.

I'd had a look at home on the map, and Ben and I had followed the road up, and I had a vague idea where Cowra was. The closer we got to Cowra, of course, was worse. ... I was little again, and it was very much like the car, the Bomaderry car, the welfare car that took me from the Home to the station. I thought, 'Oh God, it's just like a bad movie happening all over again'. And by the time we got to that signpost I was almost suicidal, 'To Cowra'. I would have given anything to turn around. I think I asked her to turn around, or asked her to stop, or something. And then I was asking, who was I going to see? Did they know we were coming? ...

Oh God, and then Val. ... And her face. That's when I started feeling not ugly no more. It was like I crawled into that house and I waked out. There was a shock having a face put on a body. And she was nice and warm. All over her,

all around her was warm. I often think about how they would have felt too. We had half a million cups of tea. ...

Richard stood away from me for a while ... I didn't know how you were supposed to relate to male cousins, or Aboriginal men for that matter. I don't have to stand away from him and he doesn't have to stand away from me any more, and we both understand anger because as the youngest in the family that was taken away, he knows he can't make up for the past. Neither can I, and I think that Richard and I particularly do now is talk about some sort of future for our children.

The passage from which this is taken will need a commentary, and it will be a sad one. Val died a year later, and while Richard remained a friend, Joy's learning to become an Erambie Aborigine embedded in her close family (as opposed to a south coast Aborigine without strong kinship ties) ended in disillusionment. Joy's family education began the next day when she spent eighty dollars filling up her first cousin's Janey's fridge with food and lollies, only to find most of it distributed round the whole reserve several hours later. She charged this to experience but after one or two later short visits, when she found some of her family too affected by alcohol to make any real connection with her, and after she was robbed, she vowed never to return. And she did not.

### **Wollongong, 1995**

Given its importance in her life, one scene should encompass the development of identification of herself as an Aboriginal. In the 1950s the only Aboriginal she had heard of, she said, was Albert Namatjira. In 1970 she watched the Aboriginal boys diving for coins at the La Perouse Reserve and congratulated herself on not being like 'one of them'. Until she met Doretta in 1973, she remained an unattached and unfixed Aboriginal, mixing with her relatives in inner city suburbs without knowing who they were. Meeting her mother, then, brought the double gift of fulfilling her lifetime dream, and also, rather unexpectedly allowing herself to be slotted into to the same kinship system. Her poem 'Jus like me ma man, jus' like me ma', written in the mid 80s, expressed her pleasure in this:

I reckon I'm the lucky one  
 'Cause I've been told an' told  
 Again, that, in many ways, I'm  
 Jus' like me ma, 'jus like me ma.

In the mid-1980s, returned from Erambie, Joy signed herself ‘Joy Williams Wiradjuri’. In 1987 she began keeping scrapbooks of press cuttings of contemporary Aboriginal news, a period of ‘really hating whitefellers’. In about 1995 she began to call herself ‘Janaka [blossom] Wiradjuri’. By 2000 in Wollongong she enjoyed the courtesy title granted to elders of ‘Auntie’. In an interview of 2003 she told me:

I’m still in Koori [Aboriginal] spirituality, very much. Wattle tree, what’s the wattle tree there for? There’ll be a new one in your yard. ...My wattle tree is Wiradjuri Williams wattle tree, goanna totem with the wattle tree flowering. Never grow it, never plant it or grow it ourselves. If it’s growing there it’s supposed to be. That makes me happy.

When and where should this difficult scene be set? The most creative literary period in her life, lasting some ten years after she met her Cowra family 1983, expressed most graphically her sense of Aboriginality, more in the feeling or what she had lost, and hatred for the colonizers, rather than a real pride in her own descent. They are taken from her unpublished ms. ‘Wiradjuri Woman Valley Man Love’, written as the main part of her MA thesis in Creative Writing.

We will turn as turn we must...  
 And cut clean off the hand that fed us  
 Poisoned flour, poisoned wine,  
 Told us lies, raped and abused us  
 We will turn, we will turn!

I am black – I’ve been reared on your hatred –  
 Believe me and don’t underestimate me – ‘cause  
 I’ve been reared on your hatred and lies,  
 I hate you with all my Blackness  
 Black hate that will burn out your eyes!

One of Joy’s most quoted poems was ‘Dora Me Mum’ which depicts her in the Home in Goulburn, her brain ruined by alcohol and neglect, in an institution.

So pale and fragile is Dora, me mum,  
 With stooped over shoulders she shuffles along  
 Whiteman’s insanity.

...  
 To all the gubb [white] missionaries who sued and abused her  
 Just remember two Koories  
 Will have their revenge as

We track you by night – or maybe by day –  
 Armed with our boondies.....  
 We'll see if you bleed.

That was the end of the version for at least a decade. But evidently in the last few years she revised the poem to include, as the final lines

But to gentle gubbahs who've loved us and care  
 We'll shelter and feed you  
 And say to you softly,  
 We know you cared!

Such an emotion of forgiveness appeared very rarely in anything else that she wrote. Did it represent a change of heart? This scene will be one of the most difficult to construct: Joy's Aboriginality was never fixed.

### **Wollongong, 2004**

There are several possibilities for the last scene: as guest of honour at a Wollongong 'Sorry Day', visiting Julie-Anne, or as guest of honour at a Wollongong Sorry Day in the 2000s. Currently I am drawn to some moments in my own later relationship with her. Every two or three months from 2000 I would drive from Canberra to arrive at her flat about eleven. Camomile tea which she always had ready for me; another interview, or when we'd finished them in 2004, we'd talk about the book of poetry by Link-Up clients which she and I were preparing. Television blaring, hundreds of books on Aboriginal subjects in the bookcases, Jingles the part-Skye terrier leaping on and off the bed, Prozac the cat wandering round the kitchen looking for food, the huge Aboriginal flag and the cross from Doretta's coffin on the wall. By twelve we were off to Woolworths for shopping. I'd slip the 'Invalid Parking' sticker onto the dashboard, park as close as possible to the entrance to the shopping complex. Joy leaning on my arm, we would push the trolley round Woolworths: food for Jingles and Prozac, chocolates, lollies, tea, bananas, apple juice, custard, milk, grapes, and always three packets of Horizon Blue cigarettes. Back to her flat where I'd make the tea, persuade her to turn down Oprah on the television just a little; lunch discussing the children and why they were not in contact with her. By two she would have to lie down because of back pains, but exultant that she was taking no alcohol or marijuana only a few recommended prescription drugs.

A day before she died, stricken with lung cancer, I went to see her at the Shoalhaven District Hospital. She wanted to smoke, so carrying her handbag and supporting her shuffling gait, I pushed along the drip regulator outside to the smoking area. There we had our last conversation. Back in her room when it started getting cold, one of my clearest memories was of her hospital bag. All that it contained was her glasses case and notebook and a nightie doubtless bought for a dollar at Vinnies.

Don't be sentimental here, Peter: remember how she manipulated her interviews with you as she had learned to manipulate everyone.

Will it work? Several obvious weaknesses in the 'scenes from a life structure' are emerging. One is the difficulty of carrying a lifetime's changing emotions in a single scene: her attitude to Aboriginality is a clear example. Another is that certain key events in her life may have to be referred to only peripherally, such as her reunion with Julie Anne. A third, an issue common to other styles of biography, is how to deal with periods in her life of which Joy may have been most proud, but which are ostensibly more difficult to write about interestingly. Such a period occurred in the 1990s when Joy was the regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer. Nevertheless her life did end in a kind of climax which I shall try to reproduce. Especially within Link Up, Joy was much celebrated. Two Wiradjuri friends Barbara Nicholson and Marie Melito-Russell – both past presidents of the Link Up organization – wrote poems in her honour.

Perhaps all stolen generations lives are epic lives. As they grew up, Auntie Joy, Auntie Marie and Auntie Barbara barely knew the word Aboriginal, let alone the Wiradjuri people. Each, after immense difficulties, came home to their identity. Marie Melito-Russell wrote

We share the same talents, poets and writers,  
 We don't take crap from anyone, we are both fighters  
 We are strong women, we are Wiradjuri  
 And we will always be friends, my joy and me <sup>116</sup>.

Barbara Nicholson wrote,

How could they do that to any human being  
 And still call themselves just?  
 How could they deprive you  
 Of the care of your mother



Your Wiradjuri Dreaming  
 Then blame you for your poverty.  
 Your acid wit, your fire in the belly,  
 Your determination to 'get the buggers yet' . . .

You had the courage to take on the State  
 All the way to the High Court  
 You had the intellect to go to University  
 And attain four degrees,  
 You had the creative flair  
 To write beautiful poetry  
 And the tenacity to get it published.  
 You were not to be messed with  
 Proud Black Wiradjuri woman.<sup>117</sup>

111 Williams v Minister Land Rights Act 1982 and Anor S246/200 (22 June 2001); Supreme Court of New South Wales Common Law Division, Joy Williams v The Minister, Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 and Anor, before Mr Justice Abadee, 26 August 1999

112 P. Read, Charles Perkins A Biography, rev. ed., Penguin 2001

113 Some of the characteristics of Borderline Personality Disorder relevant to Joy were defined at the Hearing as: frantic attempts to avoid real or imagined abandonment; a pattern of unstable or intense interpersonal relationships; marked and unstable sense of self, impulsiveness in areas that are potentially self-damaging (sex and substance abuse); self mutilation; mood instability; chronic feelings of emptiness; inappropriate, intense anger (trial 27-8)

114 Doretta claimed that she found out years later that at the time of Joy's birth she had indeed been given a clandestine (and illegal) hysterectomy.

115 Published as Coral Edwards and Peter Read, eds, *The Lost Children*, Moorebank: Doubleday, 1989; this extract is drawn from pp. 133-5

116 Marie Melito-Russell, 'My Joy', in Janaka Wiradjuri, ed., *Life Love and Pain*, an anthology of poems written by Stolen Generations Link Up, Link Up 2007, p. 1

117 Barbara Nicolson, 'The Joy I knew', in Janaka Wiradjuri 2007, pp. xi – xiii