Seductive Whisperings: Memory, Desire, and Agency in Auto/biography

Sue Lovell

As I sit here writing this, I am waiting for news. Like hundreds of others in the southern hemisphere in November, I am marking end-of-semester papers for an academic year that is in its last moments: I have one ear tuned to the phone, and one eye on email alert. I am waiting to hear from the Australian Research Council. Will they fund my application for a postdoctoral project on the Queensland artist Vida Lahey?

If they do, I can spend the next three years researching Vida's life, reaching back through a century of Brisbane's hot summers and wonderful winters to discover whatever I can about her family and friends and how they shaped her character. I will spend hours looking at her art, imagining the paint flowing from her brush; that imagining is an echo formed from the memory of seeing my mother's brush leave its own magical trail. Longer hours will be spent researching the last years of the nineteenth century or what it was like to be a young woman when so many Australian men in families across the country fought a war they still believed was their own. Although there is no evidence that Vida was a lesbian, I will be haunted by the cultural gossip in institutional corridors that she was 'uninterested' in men but "no one will ever utter a word about it."[1] In Vida's hometown and local area, which is also my home town and local area, similar gossip is repeated. It is similarly unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, as I read letters and trace Vida's life, or as I interview descendants or people who may have been in her art classes, I will have to think about what to do with that gossip and how to manage its consequences.

Even in these very preliminary stages, this issue of sexual gossip is relevant because it stands as a point of entry into an analysis of the ethics of power, agency and representation in biographical writing. British feminist and sociologist, Mary Evans, suggests that "auto/biography" can be considered the "literary equivalent of gossip" (2). She also claims that the difference is "that we tend to view gossip as in some sense partial, while auto/biography is generally assumed at least to aspire to some version of absolute and inclusive truth" (2). Until the liberating of selves that emerged in the sixties, sexual identity was considered 'private.' To include any reference to it, even in auto/biography that aspired to 'absolute' truth, was deemed improper. Evans acknowledges the important post-sixties shift in reader expectations:

. . . auto/biography is now allowed (indeed expected) to reveal everything about an individual. While it was once the case that biographers were expected to draw veils of secrecy over particular matters (largely sexual ones), it is now the case that no matter in individual life cannot, indeed, should not, be revealed. (4)

Until there is proof, should I remain respectfully silent in the public domain? Is speculation about such matters inadmissible? What are the ethics of utterance in a study that is concerned as much with her identity, her friendship circle, and family, as it is with the institutional and cultural context of her art?
In Stravinsky's Lunch, her biography of Australian artists Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington-Smith, Drusilla Modjeska had archival access to letters between Cossington-Smith and a friend. The women were twenty-four and forty-seven respectively, and these were "extraordinary letters" mentioned only "glancingly" by a previous commentator (Modjeska 240). They revealed an emotional intimacy between the women. Modjeska makes it clear, however, that the evidence for a physical intimacy was missing and that the "relationship, whatever it was," (242) was not demonstrably sexual. She reminds readers "that a romantic rhetoric was part of the convention of letter writing between women friends" (242) although these particular women were writing in the 1920s rather than the nineteenth century. Modjeska is struggling with letters as a "form in flight. They do not contain evidence of 'the real person,' but are rather traces of this person in a particular representational epistolatory guise" (Stanley 223). As biographer Modjeska then turns the spotlight on her self and reflects on her responses; she suggests she is "being overdramatic" but then asks:

Yet what explanation other than an illicit love can there be when Grace wrote on the train back to Sydney from Lanyon that 'Perseus was very miserable not being able to say goodbye to you last night. I saw you from the back of the hall and looked a goodbye to you, so perhaps you understood.' Why, as a house guest, could she not have said goodbye, unless there was a form of goodbye that was disallowed her? What hall were they in, anyway? It doesn't make sense that she couldn't say goodbye in Lanyon's hall; for a start it wasn't that big.' (242)

Clearly speculation is not a taboo in recent biographies even when the evidence is enigmatic. It is, in fact, this explicit turn to speculation that enables vulnerability to preoccupy my thinking. Neither Vida nor Cossington Smith are alive to object to being (mis)represented by the biographer.

In his book Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing, G. Thomas Couser deals with vulnerability using a biomedical model based on consent and trust. He usefully defines the term auto/biography in a way that Evans does not. Couser sees auto/biography as "life writing that focuses on the relation between the writer and a significant other" (ix). As Couser spells it out his concern is with "the ethics of representing vulnerable subjects - persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else" (xii). He gives the example of Elegy for Iris, John Bayley's narrative about his wife, Alzheimer sufferer, Iris Murdoch.

In these terms, of course, neither Modjeska's biography nor my own would be violating the trust of someone close to us: quite simply there is no intimate level of trust to violate. We are not writing auto/biographies as Couser defines them. Nevertheless, Vida and Grace (and their living relatives) clearly remain susceptible to that second aspect of Couser's definition of a vulnerable subject. They are "unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else." There is a power relation at play in writing a biography, and history accords the balance of the power quite emphatically to the biographer.

My focus in this paper, then, begins with the ethics of repeating and 'solidifying' sexual 'gossip' but it ripples outwards to incorporate the power relations inherent in any representation of historical subjects. Journalists frequently have to deal with a
similar concern because they have a form of cultural power: their words are regularly placed in the public domain. Carolyn Wells Kraus graphically expresses this in an article that examines the intersections between subjects, self, writing, and life in ways that are not auto/biographical or historical but that clearly deal with the issues of trust, representation, and power:

My job consists of sucking people's guts out. Of course that is not my job at all. I am a journalist. I tell other people's stories, giving them voice. I write with compassion and empathy. Forging people's stories under the powerful label of 'nonfiction' is a means of telling people they are not alone in the human comedy [. . .] I try to be an honest journalist. I don't misquote people, invent scenes or forge composite characters. I agonize over contexts and triple-check my facts. Still, people get angry for reasons that are difficult to explain.

Undoubtedly reducing a person's story to words on a page robs it of complexity. Subjects may perceive a gap between what they meant and how their exact words sound on the page. Perhaps those characters bearing their names are people they cannot recognize, or people who come to stand - in the stories - for ideas they never thought about. (284)

The power relation is explicit in this quote and is clearly linked to the power to overwrite the voice of the represented subject. Whilst it is not legally possible, perhaps, to libel a person who is dead because libel is attached to the sense of harm done to a living subject, the intrusion of self into a narrative may be perceived to diminish the integrity of both subject and narrative. The crux of what concerns me in writing ethically about Vida, then, is: how do I ensure that the "character bearing [her] name" is recognizable (sexually and otherwise) as her, and how do I ensure that she does not "come to stand - in the stories - for ideas [she] never thought about?" The fact that she is dead and cannot resort to a libel suit increases the chances of misrepresentation by potentially making me less accountable. I therefore need to consciously create a stronger personal commitment to ethical behaviour.

These are the familiar and troubling dilemmas that intersect in all biographical ventures and which occur increasingly as biographies become as much about the biographer as about the subject. Margaret Somerville's biography of Australian wildflower artist and environmentalist Kathleen McArthur (2004), for example, is representative of the extent of the hybridity that can be found in auto-bio-graphy with its focus on the intersections of self-life-writing. Biography blurs into autobiography and journal mode as McArthur's narrative proceeds. At one point, the author's own life, a camping trip to an area beloved by her subject, forms a forty-four page section of the book. The epilogue tells the reader what the 'biographer' has learnt in her exploration of an embodied spirituality that is mediated by art, narrative, and landscape. Beautifully written, often poetic in style, both form and content reject generic boundaries.

The potential for writing 'over' the subject escalates, then, as generic boundaries and human identities and subjectivities blur. There is an increased need to be ever more vigilant about the now common feminist strategy of transparency and conscious commitment to self reflection. Such a strategy needs to be grounded in an analysis of the ways in which theoretical concerns and emotional recognitions are imbricated. For me this involves being clearer in my thinking about the tensions that occur between the poststructuralist framework I adopt to conceptualise identity and the genesis of the project in a childhood memory that saturates the project with desire. As a preparation for the introduction I may one day write, I need to rehearse these issues as a means of
beginning to negotiate them; as a means of making sure I do not overwrite Vida's life with my desires.

Before I do this, a thumbnail sketch of Vida Lahey will position her a little more clearly in this task of negotiation. Vida (pronounced to rhyme with Ida) was born in 1882 in Pimpama, a small, rural settlement about fifty miles from Brisbane, Queensland in the subtropical north of Australia. She was the first of twelve children born to David and Jane Lahey, themselves of God-fearing pioneering stock. Her family were white, middle class, successful, entrepreneurs (Lahey 111-124, 171-185, 350-378). Some of her siblings became local government officials, lawyers, and businessmen. Vida remained single and devoted her life to family, art, and the Queensland art scene that began to emerge in Brisbane as she grew to womanhood in the late 1890s. She quickly developed a national profile as an artist with an exceptional relationship to colour (MacAulay 14, 20, 38). She exhibited paintings nationally and internationally at a time when Australia has been called a "quarantined culture": a culture that was cut off from the world, colonial and irrevocably antipodean (Williams, passim). Study overseas created a desire to share her artistic discoveries when she returned to Australia. Her abiding attachment to family and place, however, meant that she resisted the more cosmopolitan cultures and art scenes in Sydney and Melbourne, although she visited these places frequently and had a wide network of colleagues and friends. Consequently, she had a lasting impact on Brisbane's conservative art scene. She introduced contemporary work by other artists and methods from southern states and overseas, as well as art lessons for children through the Royal Queensland Art Gallery. In the 1950s she received an M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire) in recognition of her service to art in Queensland. Throughout her adult life, her friend, sculptress Daphne Mayo, shared her passion for art and was also instrumental in initiating and consolidating institutional change (MacAulay 23-24).

This, then, is my subject. A formal 1903 photograph (MacAulay 16) shows a woman who appears to be the epitome of the stereotypical Victorian spinster (complete with high necked blouse buttoned to the throat and sporting various frills and flounces). Later photographs from the thirties (MacAulay 10, 63) still show her dressed in very sombre fashion in sensible hats, smart shoes and a highly patterned two piece suit, or a plaid skirt and jacket.

Yet this was also a woman who, unlike many women artists prior to World War One, chose to work en plein air (Hoorn). She encouraged her students to do the same and led painting expeditions that involved a hike of more than ten kilometres up to 'the humpy'. This was a two room shack on Tamborine Mountain (sixty five kilometres south of Brisbane in rainforest terrain) that was often augmented with tents when the group was large or included the extended family (MacAulay 30, Lahey 256, 266, 288).

Her dedication to friends, family, and to art reveals an altruism shaped by what appear to be Victorian sensibilities. Her lifelong friend, Daphne Mayo, once wrote of Vida that she "was born in and belonged and had received all her ideas in the nineteenth century; a [training?] in which you accepted the status quo - not questioned it." Daphne went on to observe that Vida had "great personal determination and a sense of
duty to all fellow beings [and that her] very quiet and modest personality covered an
iron determination" (Mayo Box 1).

The winning of Federal suffrage in Australia in 1902, shaped as it was by a discourse of
duty to the nation through a maternalist welfare state (Lake 1999 28, 49-72) and
"mother-woman's world" (49) did little to diminish the prescriptive self-sacrificing
that usually accompanies 'duty'. As a single woman Vida's duty lay not in
reproduction of the nation's population but in her willing service to her large extended
family and, for several decades, her willing contributions to the institution of art and
community of artists. In 1915, therefore, Vida took herself out of the running for
Head of the Art Department in the Central Technical College to enable a man of
national standing as an artist to better serve art in Brisbane (MacAulay 22). By 1916
three of her seven brothers and fifteen of her cousins were enlisted in the Empire's
war. Vida gave up her independence, her art and her teaching and, financed by the
family sawmilling firm, she went to England to establish a home base for them when
they were injured or on leave (Lahey 267). The difficulty of gaining passage home
meant this dedication was rewarded with two years travelling, painting and studying
across Europe with various friends. Within a few years of returning to Australia, she
had become a member of the Queensland Art Society Council and of the Queensland
National Art Gallery board of advisors as well as a trustee in the Royal Queensland
Art Society (which soon administered an Art Fund that required constant energy and
fund raising administration). Although she painted and exhibited and continued to
develop her career, there was constant competition between civic duties and her own
work. By 1956 she was able to recognise this dilemma and she wrote: "on looking
back now I realise that as time went on I had allowed myself to be deflected too often
and too long from the most important concern of any artist's life, viz. their own work"
(in MacAulay 29). The story is common in women's lives.

In one sense the biography is feminist simply because, like the early feminist focus on
women writers, it brings the neglected work of a woman artist back into the spotlight
so that it can be more highly valued. In another sense, it is feminist because I write as
a woman who recognises that conflict between family and creativity. The demands on
Vida were very high. Parents, siblings, and friends played a large role in her life. Even
after the death of her own parents in the early 1940s, she remained a surrogate
daughter to Daphne Mayo's parents (Mayo Box 28).

Despite differences in family structure between myself and Vida, my own life story
informs the way I write, making my engagement with Vida's life to a certain extent
auto/biographical. The intersections between self-life-writing blur the boundaries
between the subject of 'the' life and the subject who writes 'of' life. If my 'biography' is
to be successful, it is very necessary that I bring to the writing a sense of identification
with, and insight into, some of Vida's struggles, some kind of transferred 'authenticity'
of the type that Somerville brings to McArthur's life through 'place' knowledge. This
"autobiographical dilation," as Kate Lilley calls it, is vital (85). It may enable the
distance produced by history to briefly dissolve or waver so that readers may be
carried into the experiences they imagine they share by virtue of being women,
particularly if they also share locations of class or race. I need to be soaked in
grounded archival research, in the minutiae and the context of Vida's life to test this
insight. My values may not be her values, indeed, it is unlikely, so the important thing
is to identify differences and see if they do create a barrier to understanding past
experiences of women and of Vida in particular. This is the process of standing back
and watching the imagined experiences I accumulate ooze out of me, move across
time and space into a 'cooler,' more critical, frame. I need detachment but without the
loss of that umbilicus of identification. This combination is, perhaps, what motivates
and sustains much feminist work.

Yet I remain unsettled when I see those strangely formal photographs of the two-piece
suits, the hats, the shoes as a painting outfit. This is not simply because they seem to
link to those stereotypically Victorian high necked blouses, but because it does call
attention to contradictions within Vida's subjectivity, the adventuring spirit of
camping trips and hiking through rainforest terrain with students. This is a productive
'unsettling,' though because I am reminded of my theoretical awareness, as a
poststructuralist, that the differences within and between women are vast. This is not
only because I recognise that women are constructed along multiple axes of
difference, even if they share the same skin colour or class or culture or sexuality. It is
also because poststructuralism interrogates the whole concept of authenticity, of
identity as coherent and of the subject (particularly a female subject) as humanist, as
having agency as though it is something intrinsically personal, like blue eyes or a big
nose.

I am sympathetic to Susan Hekman's reminder that "agency is defined and
circumscribed by the discursive formation; it is not a given condition but a *constituted
element of subjectivity*" (110, italics mine). 'Choices' made and actions taken are,
therefore, "produced by *agents* who utilize the discursive tools available to them"
(90). Agency continues to exist but those who exercise it do so, as sociologist
Lawrence Grossberg pointed out, in conditions that "are not of their own making"
(16).

This means I cannot represent Vida's identity as 'coherent' and 'authentic' through a
recognition of our common experiences as women even though the pull of ideological
pressure calls on me emotionally to do so. Whilst she may have perceived her agency
to be a result of personal determination and individual capacity to make things
happen, I cannot write a biography that turns its back on the recognition that this
agency is a function of her belonging to the categories of single, white, female,
middle class, colonizing citizen.

What I can do is acknowledge that Vida worked very much within, as well as against,
the art institutions of her day. I can see her as simultaneously empowered and
constrained. Her activism was successful because she effectively deployed her
femininity for the improvement of society. This means, however, that the dominant
form of official recognition for Vida remains feminized because of her maternalized
services to art: she nurtured it and cajoled it into being; she shared her expertise; she
dedicated many years to teaching art to adults; and she pioneered free lessons for
children in the Queensland Art Gallery (a tradition that is maintained to this day).

Within the world of art *as a practice*, rather than a public service, however, Vida and
her work remain undervalued. Women, as feminist historian Jeanette Hoorn (1994)
points out, were permitted agency in the realms of design, craftwork, and
modernism(s), before men realized that this was the next place to 'be'. Once men
became modernists in the thirties and forties, Vida Lahey also became best known for her flower paintings rather than her urban works or modernist flavour. What concerns me about this 'solution,' this discovery of the constructed 'truth effect' of Vida's life, remains the issue of (mis)representation of a vulnerable subject through my own historical agency (that is, I am here and she is not!). By shaping my representation of her 'life' through this theoretical framework am I blurring the way in which Vida may have related to her contexts? That is, am I removing her as an agent of her own very dignified and efficient will and imposing my own desires? Let me highlight the ease with which this slippage occurs by 'reading' one of Vida's paintings rather than the context that produced her as an artist.

The painting is very simple: on the left is a two storey building in a soft cream colour that reflects bright sunlight. Receding into the background, this building extends downwards four fifths of the frame and across half of it. Its roof is invisible. Along the length of its upper story are windows set at an angle that is so oblique that they are simply shadowed recesses. In the lower level, door shaped recesses are similarly presented so that, with the exception of the red ochre-tinged door closest to the viewer, these are also obscured. The foreground is yellow-brown earth fading to grass that looks parched but far from dead. The grass is bisected by a solid timber fence in the middle distance where the building ends. Beyond that fence, but visible above it, stretch more angled buildings beneath a patch of pale blue sky washed out with heat. On the right side of the frame is a tree arching across this sky so that the cool, dark green of the leaves seem to be the roof of the entrance to a tunnel. The perspective takes the viewer's eye into the painting through this tunnel to rest on the distant buildings rather than the one that takes the most space. The leaves fill the right corner and extend across to the middle of the frame. They cast a shadow that is both deep and mottled on the cream of the building and the ground so that the tunnel-effect is strengthened, and the red of the door is partly darkened. Although the red door is set obliquely to the extreme left of the painting, and the eye is drawn through the tunnel entrance to the opposite end of the building, the fence and the sky, the whole is called simply 'The Red Door'. It is a scene of deep and subtle contrasts, earth and sky, sunlight and shadow, peace in a corner of an urban landscape.

My response to the title, which I see as the conduit to Vida's consciousness, if you like, is to think further about the levels of obliqueness in this image. Quite apart from those contrasts that I just mentioned which are subtle and effective in terms of mood, there seems to be an invitation in this painting. Only the red door is available. It is this door that the artist wants us to focus upon. It is shadowed by the tree. That shadow could easily represent the unconscious and that door could be the opening into it. It is a marginalized door, set off from the main tunneling effect of the painting. It is a door that, although not (menstrual) blood red, reinforces that feminine element despite its lines and angles. The symbolism of the tunnel, the curves and the perspective all work as a second invitation to enter the tunnel itself. The tree recalls the peace of Eden, the red door the temptation of a vision or knowledge that is forbidden. The sharper more masculine angles and lines of the buildings are clear within the painting, indeed without them the tunnel-effect would be dramatically diminished, yet these lines and angles lie submissively beneath the heat. The shadow soothes even as it deepens the effect of the heat. Despite its soporific atmosphere, the title demands that the viewer think about that door, ponder the title, actively create meanings.
I (think I) know that the suggestiveness of the colour red and the vaginal tunnel would deeply offend Vida's Victorian sensibilities. Yet, with relatively little effort, I can fit this interpretation of her painting into a broader argument about feminist agency. Vida's urban landscapes challenge the domestic focus expected of women artists. Her gaze was heterogeneous, her images not restricted by gendered expectations. The male gaze and male desire are not omniscient. When her subjects are human, they are frequently women so intent on their own tasks and activities that they exclude the viewer and do not invite a sense of being looked at, nor of being spied upon in a voyeuristic manner.

And all of this, of course, could be the seductive whisperings of my own feminist desire. "There is no history,' Emerson wrote in his 1839 Journals, 'There is only biography.' To which Thoreau is said to have retorted, 'There is no biography, only autobiography.'" (qtd. in Wells Kraus 291) I want that painting to speak to me of those things that Vida may never articulate in any other medium or manner. I want Vida's dedication and love for art that expressed itself as civic 'duty' to be somehow connected to the passion she must have had to have worked so long and so hard. I want to lift the veil and see something I recognise as feminist agency even if Vida was not a feminist: her activism, after all, was for art, not for women. What did art 'do' for her that she wanted to share it so much with the world?

And, just as importantly, bearing in mind Thoreau, why does this matter so much to me? Why do I want to understand what motivated her? Why does it have to be something deeply personal, something that is there in her paintings, something she could not relinquish because it was bound into the very thread of her being? Why can't I peacefully relinquish such humanist modes of expression? I suspect the answer to this tension between humanism and poststructuralism is linked to a single childhood moment that remains magically intact against the flow of the years or the impact of theory.

It was a rare moment; perhaps it was raining outside in England's cold drizzling way so that the house was a haven and my mother a part of that comfort. Perhaps it was not - though it hardly matters for the sense of suspension is what remains, whatever the cause. I do remember sitting at my mother's elbow and watching in fascinated envy as she paints. The colour seems to flow from deep inside her, like light that has penetrated a small crevice and illuminated a cave. I can see that creative energy travel along her arm, along the veins on the top of her hand, invisibly, through the sensible fingers and work worn hands with their short nails, and finally, almost irrelevantly, through the tips of the brush and onto her canvas. There it appears in the shape and form that she gives to it, deftly, beautifully, and to me, mysteriously. She doesn't do this just once but over and over until there is a rhythm between the artist, the colour and the canvas; a rhythm from which I am excluded. In that moment I know I will never be able to paint; the colour is not in me. I have no memory of the picture, or of her tinting her brush from a palette - only of the creativity that came from inside her. As my siblings and I grew, she stopped painting. When we had all left home, she began again.

If all biography is autobiography, then this is the tenuous link between Vida and I, and it is both deeply personal and retrospectively recognized as structural: my
mother's sacrifice to the demands of family are the equivalent to Vida's civic duties. Both may be read as a limitation. The biography may or may not amplify that emotional link but this singular memory serves as an emotional springboard, a motivation for understanding and, perhaps, a bid to moving closer to sharing the magic of creativity. This liberatory desire of mine and the language in which I express it, links me more to ideas that cluster around 'authentic' selves and inner 'truths;' ideas that are popular in biographies because they appeal to the voyeurism and emotional need for closure in researchers and readers alike.

The 'public' and 'proper' image in the photograph of Vida painting is in tension, then, with the 'personal' possibilities she opens up through her paintings or the fact that she is painting at all. Similarly, my poststructuralist historian's 'head' (which examines discourses that were the context for my subject's creation of the 'truth' of her life) is in tension with my humanist 'heart' (my 'inner' source of inspiration). And, although I can't answer all of the questions I have set for myself at the moment, I can see these autobiographical tensions are structuring the biographical and historical narrative. I am forced to confess that this poststructuralist retains elements of a humanist heritage.

Fortunately for my academic sanity, Australian feminist Bronwyn Davies, also a poststructuralist, suggests:

> it may be inevitable that we go on reading ourselves and being read within the terms of [] outmoded discourses, at least to some extent, since access to a new discourse does not undo or outrule the other as we supposed it did when we were ruled by the principles of logocentric thought. Not only will others continue to constitute us in terms of humanist discourse, but we cannot easily shed the patterns of desire, nor the interpretive frameworks that we took up in learning to understand and use humanist discourses not just as social scientists, but as participants in the everyday world. (Concept of Agency 47)

If we are subjects in various discourses, one of those is inevitably that of humanism because it continues to permeate our everyday lives and we continue to function perhaps much of the time within its terms (willingly or through imposition). Paul Smith suggests that the humanist individual is "the illusion of whole and coherent personal organization" formulated through ideological discourse. We tend to call this individual the subject in a singular sense but Smith insists that this singular term is "inaccurately used to describeth e conglomeration of positions, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily indefeasible, into which a person is called momentarily" by various discourses (xxxv).

In fact, and this is what poststructuralists examine, the subject constructed by a particular discourse is not always an agent. It is subjected. In other words, "the human agent exceeds the 'subject'" (Smith xxx). It is "not equivalent to either the 'subject' or the 'individual.'" He argues that the term "agent" can be:

> used to mark the idea of a form of subjectivity where, by virtue of the contradictions and disturbances found in and among subject-positions, the possibility (indeed, the actuality) of resistance to ideological pressure is allowed for (even though that resistance too must be produced in an ideological context). (xxxv)

So at the heart of all this discussion of agency and desire, of the acknowledgement of the autobiographical in the biographical, of the structuring of ideas through memory and emotions that are constitutive rather than residual, lies the recognition that I want
to find in Vida (and perhaps in my mother and myself?) an agent who resists. I want to find that she consciously exceeds her positioning as a woman in a time, place and culture that only seemed to valorise motherhood as a woman's contribution to building a nation. Whilst acknowledging that her M.B.E. was an honour, I want her paintings to be her message that she is more than someone who is only of 'service' to art in Queensland. She also has her own desires. I am deeply curious about whether she exceeded these discourses to the extent of leaving evidence that she was, indeed, a lesbian, because lesbian desire is such a powerful trope for agency and resistance. That curiosity, however, cannot become too dominant a filter for my interpretation of her life and art.

I do not know if the archival material will reveal a woman who consciously inscribes her desires in her art or a woman who will offer me a life that is itself resistant to my own desires. I do know the project is perfectly justified in elaborating on that structural and discursive relation between women's creativity and their agency in the world. Experiences are shaped and constructed by our positioning within the discourses that circulate around and through us. To give up agency as a personal attribute is not to become passive or determined by cultural and social forces. It is simply to acknowledge that we need to know where the system locates the tools of agency, such as having a voice and/or voting rights on committees, the power to access avenues of self-representation like art or literature, the use of a personal disposable income, the freedom and ability to travel and network with others in your field, for example. We can then access them for ourselves, some more easily than others who are rendered less powerful, mobile or validated by history. I'm sure that Vida knew how to 'work the system,' and her class and race positioned her well to deploy her understandings; but that agency not only represented the achievement of her civic goals, it exacted a personal sacrifice clothed in the shape of civic duty. I want to better understand that tension and think more carefully about the 'tools' available to women's agency now and in the past in terms of similarities and differences.

Finally, for now, my desire to know this woman and her times better can be acknowledged as simultaneously a product of my childhood and of my feminism. That desire is, of course, only a desire at the moment. It has the potential to be constitutive, instrumental, and conducive to agency because, like Wells Kraus, I can put those representations into the public domain, I can get published, and I can reach out to others with my ideas about the how the past has shaped who we are as women today. I don't want to abuse that privilege by overwriting Vida's self-representation even if I believe that identity (like my own) to be a truth effect rather than an authentic Truth. One thing is for certain, though, without access to the 'tools' of agency, my desire is only a yearning that waits for its expression. That expression will come when, via publication or funding, the social world constructs me as an agent. Perhaps I will hear soon whether 'my' agency will be facilitated by the Research Council? Then I can truly begin.

Notes
1 Personal conversation with colleague, March 2004. back
Works Cited


