

The path that runs across

Nicholas Cheeseman

Michaela Nettell

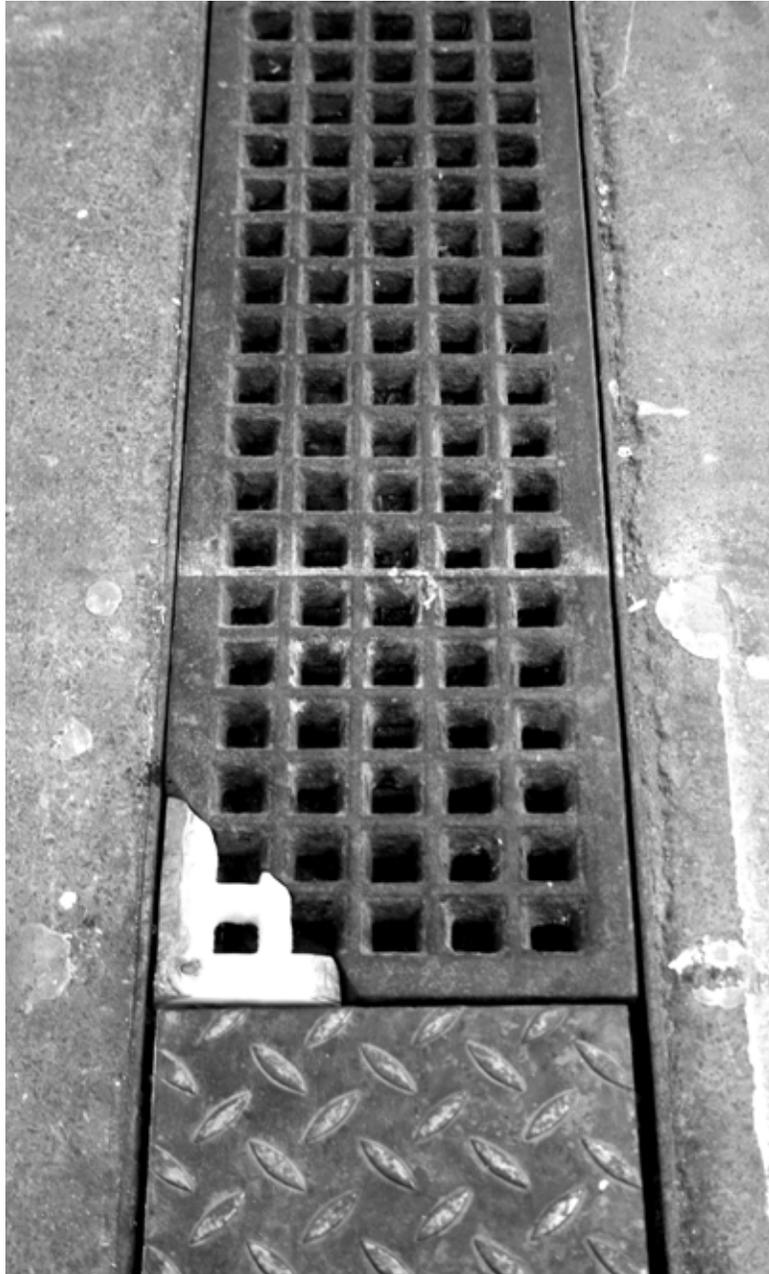
Rachel Wilberforce

with texts by

Peter Johnson

Maru Rojas

The path that runs across



HETEROTOPIAS

Maru Rojas

Rush hour happens between 10 and 4. This is when the loudspeakers sewn to backpacks start thumping, the normal CDs for CD players and the MP3 CDs played aloud for the discerning audience. Such is the demand for these backpacks that they have started customising them for the sellers, full time employment. There's an All vs. All compilation of psycho, reggae, electro, tribal and ska, quickly followed by a cumbia version of *I will survive* in the top hits of disco music. Depeche Mode's *Personal Jesus* is played a few times a day.

At other times it's impossible to sell anything. Walking from the carriage to the interchange you can find boiled sweets, salted peanuts, chewing gum, lollies, halogen and LED lamps, nail clippers, pens, key chains, diaries, books. A digital version of the New Penal Code, just in case.

You count the carriages going by; swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh. And then in pairs; swoosh swoosh, swoosh swoosh. And then they blur; infinite.

The landscape in Australia is a product of artifice. The lantana with its small, pretty flowers and harmless growth back home slowly overtook everything else and now grows three meters tall, reckless and impassable. The lantana wrapped around young native trees, squeezing the sunlight out of their reach or toppling them over. Indoors, however, it's artificial plastic flowers, ornamental mantelpieces and Victorian canopies, the antithesis of tropical.

The irony of hyper-localisation is tangibly present. Madeira vine, thistle, water hyacinth, mimosa, blackberry, gorse, Chilean needlegrass, boxthorn and fireweed are so abundant and so despised. Like the Brutalist council flats – those cities in the skies that no one wants to take responsibility for – lying abandoned and sprawling across much of the city.

The hissing sound of meat hitting the grill in one of the food stands brings you back; tsss, tsss, tsss-tsss, one indistinguishable mass on the heat.

Around 2pm, a young man stands shirtless in the middle of the carriage. You find him offensive in his humanity and desperation; he smells of aggression and 3 weeks without a shower in semi-tropical heat. He lays down his T-shirt which is covered in broken glass and slowly lowers his back onto it and following the soft swagger of the train he lays still and motionless for a minute before swiftly getting up and coming round to collect donations. He times his performance perfectly between stops.

Most people look at their feet or into the void. They probably think he's going to spend their money on glue for sniffing and he doesn't help his cause by saying you should be grateful I'm here, earning a living and not robbing you on the streets. But they're happy to get their wallets out for Chinese manufactured products; invisible ink pens, colouring pencils, shoe shining kits, mango with chilli powder, maps, wallets, fresh smoothies in plastic bags drunk through a straw and DVDs.

You count the footsteps going thump, thump, thump in troupes of two, thump, thump, thump then threes, thump, thump, thump, thump then a few at a time then thump, thump, thump, thump they become a marching sea.

Most people are comfortable in this landscape. A land of contradictions like many others, its innate beauty and man-made ugliness having been examined over and over to little avail. The plastic flowers on the mantelpiece, carved out entirely of red cedar, coexist with the solar panels on the roof. Californian bungalow imitation timber houses with gable roofs are built and rebuilt at the edge of the bush. Someone is always surprised to be caught in the yearly fires.

People don't like discussing the concept of terra nullius. No pyramids, no ceremonial graves, catacombs, palaces, gathering places, permanent

dwelling, no tangible markings on the landscape. It's easier to think that a civilisation that doesn't build is no civilisation at all. They see no irony in that.

You watch the CD sellers weighed down by the sound systems on their backs. Psycho, trance, pop, heavy metal, cumbias, merengues and salsas becoming one indistinct soundtrack.

It's the DVD sellers that are at the top of the food chain. It goes like this: at the bottom the beggars, with nothing to offer but their neediness, the shoe shiners, the shoeless children supposedly come all the way from the mountains and the newspaper sellers selling yesterday's news, then the general sellers; those who sell sweets and maps, wallets and the Highway Code, scratching tools, anti-stress balls, ointments, a booklet with the Mexican Presidents, stickers and comic books, then the buskers; alone, in pairs or groups. The most profitable are the DVD sellers and the instrument players: violins or guitars, organs, keyboards or whole bands. CD selling would be up there were it not for the physicality required to carry the loudspeaker backpacks.

These two places easily merge into one. The love of all things American, all things foreign, the fake flowers, the plastic covers on the sofas, the miniature water fountains plugged to the multi-socket, the imitation purses, handbags, belts and perfumes, the love of cars and roads over any other form of transport. The lattice that partially conceals while revealing just enough in the humid heat, the front garden fencing and gated communities that offer just enough distancing. Fake this, fake that, pirate this, a copy of that.

At rush hour the sellers leave. From 4pm the bodies start piling 3-deep and by then the 12kg loudspeaker backpacks slow even the toughest sellers down. Personal space, at best times limited, has no meaning anymore. Human traffic is suffocating.