CHAPTER 11

Creative work: Feminist representations of gendered and domestic violence in 1970s Australia

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The banner 'Justice for Violet and Bruce Roberts' is a portrait of a mother and son who were brutally victimised by their husband and father and then jailed for his murder (see Figure 11.1). In the face of this history, they are depicted here as dignified, ordinary and humane. They appear comfortably side by side, their faces smiling warmly. The text and native flower adornment (perhaps a gift) indicate support for their release. Their faces and torsos are embodied representations of the issue of domestic violence and the mistreatment of its victims within the criminal justice system, but there is no depiction of bodily injury. Instead the prison bars signal the injury of the state, suggesting the systemic failure to recognise suffering in domestic violence cases. The concentration of meaning in this image makes it a powerful representation of feminist responses to domestic violence in the 1970s, culminating in the campaign for the release of Violet and Bruce Roberts in 1980.

Figure 11.1: 'Justice for Violet and Bruce Roberts', banner, 1980, Toni Robertson (now held in National Museum of Australia).

Source: Photograph reproduced with permission of Toni Robertson, © the artist.

The artist Toni Robertson, a member of feminist activist group Women Behind Bars, was the campaign's resident artist. In an oral history with Ann Genovese in 1995, Robertson spoke of the need for protest to entail 'both visual consumption and spectacle'.¹ This was a crucial component of the creative representations that sought to solicit awareness of, and engagement with, feminist critiques of gendered oppression through a range of media including visual art, creative writing and film. This banner is part of Robertson's series of images for the campaign and is an important artefact of the history of feminist responses to, and representations of, domestic violence in this period.

Susan Magarey's account of women's liberation in *Dangerous Ideas*² is a reminder that activism is a form of cultural as well as political expression and that subversive creativity and collaboration are central to exposing the impediments to women's freedom, devising forms of resistance and imagining alternative futures. The painful process of identifying, naming

1 Ann L. Genovese, 'The Battered Body, A Feminist Legal History' (PhD thesis, University of Technology Sydney, 1999), 208.

2 Susan Magarey, *Dangerous Ideas: Women's Liberation—Women's Studies—around the World* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014).

and responding to gendered and domestic violence as a feminist issue is examined here through the lens of cultural history. There is now a considerable literature on Australian feminism in the 1970s, some of which addresses in detail the history of feminist responses to gendered violence. There has also been scholarly interest in what Magarey calls the ‘cultural renaissance’ born of 1970s feminism. These histories provide crucial context for a close examination of creative representations of gendered and domestic violence that I undertake here. The purpose of such an approach is to enrich existing historical analysis of the emerging feminist discourse of domestic violence by incorporating close readings of explicitly feminist cultural artefacts with an eye to traditions of visual signification and literary techniques while placing them in their immediate and broader historical context. I do this not so much to reveal the conditions of their production, which have been documented elsewhere, but to examine what it was their creators sought to communicate and the strategies of representation they deployed. By offering this account, I aim to increase the range of voices and the modes of expression that provide insight into feminism’s documentation, analysis and response to gendered and domestic violence in this period. The phenomena that these artefacts addressed were confronting, for some they were threatening, and the nature of the creative representations was—in turns—immediate, graphic, challenging, subtle and sensitive. Here I showcase a sample of creative representations from four genres—still images, poetry, fiction and film—to demonstrate the rich range of registers and media through which feminists came to an understanding of, and responded to, the distinct issue of domestic violence.

In a 2013 article describing their project ‘Cultures of Australian Feminist Activism 1970–1990’, Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson note that histories of the Australian women’s movement tended to be marked by (among other things) ‘the neglect of cultural activism; an understatement of the “direct action” ethos of the movement; and an understatement of the role of humor, imagination and creativity in the movement’s activism’.³ While their project, and others begun since,⁴ address this neglect by

3 A. Bartlett and M. Henderson, ‘The Australian Women’s Movement Goes to the Museum: The “Cultures of Australian Feminist Activism, 1970–1990” Project’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, no. 37 (2013): 87, doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2012.10.013.

4 For example, Petra Mosmann, ‘Encountering Feminist Things: Generations, Interpretations and Encountering Adelaide’s “Scrap Heap”’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2016): 172–89, doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2016.1157700.

providing biographies of material objects originally held privately by participants in the movement, this chapter draws on creative artefacts that are available through public archives, libraries and art museums. My purpose is to contribute to a growing scholarship that reads a history of feminist activism through these vital forms of representation, in the hope of enriching existing histories of creative activism and the intersecting histories of feminism and domestic violence in this period.

While feminist analysis of gendered violence has consistently sought to locate domestic violence within larger social phenomena, during the 1970s a recognition and articulation of the urgency of the issue required a specific language to emerge that isolated this form of violence from other aspects of gendered oppression. Creative representations contributed to this process of identifying and describing domestic violence as a primary concern of feminists. In some cases, these representations foreshadowed more explicit prose discussion of domestic violence. The term itself would not become embedded in the feminist or wider lexicon until the late 1970s; when it did, it signalled the crystallisation of domestic violence as a policy issue and the impact of feminist work on wider discourses of gender, violence and family.

Women's liberation, women's refuges and domestic violence

In the development of an agenda for social revolution, women's liberation sought to fully understand, in order to expose and critique, the structures and effects of gendered oppression. The elimination of domestic violence must be understood as part of the wider revolution to which the movement aspired. At the same time, domestic violence—particularly its prevalence and severity—took some feminists by surprise. In Marilyn Lake's history of Australian feminism, she describes the commitment to a social revolution that was the defining feature of the women's liberation movement.⁵ This meant calling for the overthrow of conventional roles within marriage, the family and the work force. It meant reimagining political aims outside of parliament and beyond equal citizenship status. Lake notes that from the early 1970s women set up informal temporary accommodation,

5 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 231–52.

sometimes opening up their own houses to other women. Community action of this kind figured as a key strategy in this revolutionary politics, providing a first port of call for women abandoning marriages in pursuit of an alternative life.⁶ Jacqueline Theobald's account of the Victorian women's refuge movement emphasises the critique of marriage at its heart, noting that women's changing attitudes to sexuality and their new-found access to work and decent wages were central to this. More than ever before, women could aspire to translate this into expectations of living free from the confines of marriage in financially autonomous households.⁷ Rather than envisioning the provision of accommodation as having the single aim of an escape route from violence, women's liberationists sought to make available an alternative to the range of constraints in the marital home, not least unpaid labour and economic dependence, and to the increasingly recognised problem of women's homelessness.

The history of women's refuges, as historians of this period now understand it, began by a whisker in Sydney. The two Women's Commissions, held in March of 1973 and 1974 in that city, frame Janet Ramsay's story of the key turning points in a trajectory towards Elsie, Australia's first women's refuge, which was set up by squatter occupation on 16 March 1974, in Glebe.⁸ The agenda of the 1973 Commission prioritised important themes such as 'women as workers' and 'women as mothers'. The issue of rape was raised as part of the theme of 'women as sex objects', but discussion of other aspects of gendered violence was not canvassed.⁹ However, a year later, the 1974 Commission became a forum for concentrating on the violence suffered by women in their homes. Ramsay explains this in part by feminists' increasing focus on rape—inside and outside the domestic space—in the intervening year, noting the content of the *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter*. At the same time, the first 'public clues' about domestic violence began to appear, notably in the May 1973 issue of the newsletter, which published the correspondence between a woman who had fled a violent marriage and the Minister for Social Security, Bill Hayden. This correspondence explained the woman's circumstances and the terms of the new supporting mother's benefit, which was about

6 Ibid., 229.

7 Jacqueline Lee Theobald, 'A History of the Victorian Women's Domestic Violence Services Movement', (PhD thesis, RMIT University, 2011), 55.

8 Janet Ramsay, 'Policy Activism on a "Wicked Issue": The Building of Australian Feminist Policy on Domestic Violence in the 1970s', *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 247–48, doi.org/10.1080/08164640701364661.

9 Ibid., 247.

to be introduced.¹⁰ By October that year both the *Women's Liberation* and *Sydney WEL* newsletters advertised a November meeting to discuss a women's night shelter. While the core issue this advertisement identified was homelessness, it also recognised that women were fleeing 'difficult domestic situations (like, their husband is beating them)'.¹¹ At the second commission in March 1974, woman after woman rose to speak of their suffering at the hands of the violent men they lived with. At one point, Anne Summers, one of the organisers of the November meeting, 'seized the microphone and invited the listening women to turn their shock into action the following weekend'.¹² This invitation was taken up and Elsie became the first of 12 women's refuges established across the country within a year.¹³

The fundamental role refuges played in responding to domestic violence became increasingly clear as more and more women's stories of enduring violence filled the discursive spaces that feminist activists created. Activists without direct experience of domestic violence came to their earliest understandings of the severity of this phenomenon through consciousness-raising forums such as the Women's Commissions and through their work supporting women who came to refuges in need of safety from harm. In the 1977 account of their work in the period 1974–76, the Melbourne-based Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective wrote that they had:

uncovered, in the few months that [the Halfway House] has been operating, an enormous social problem that has always been there. Social workers have known it to be there because they have been dealing with these desperate women for years. The government departments have known about it. Every week they try to send dozens of women to us. Yet they never bothered to set up emergency accommodation for women. It took women, feminist women, to do that, and now that a Halfway House exists the enormity and the horror of it all is being revealed.¹⁴

10 *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter*, May 1973, cited in Ramsay, 'Policy Activism on a "Wicked Issue"', 248.

11 *Sydney WEL Newsletter*, 10 November 1973, cited in Ramsay, 'Policy Activism on a "Wicked Issue"', 248.

12 Ramsay, 'Policy Activism on a "Wicked Issue"', 248.

13 Suellen Murray, 'The Origins and Development of the Australian Women's Refuge Movement', *Parity* 19, no. 10 (2006): 11.

14 The Women's Liberation Halfway House Collection, *1974–76 Herstory of the Halfway House—Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective* (Melbourne: Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective, 1977).

Despite emerging work towards legal reforms seeking to criminalise violence within the home, the failure of government agencies to measure and expose the problem or make provisions for women persisted. While women's liberationists sought to respond to the immediate needs of victims and politicise the issue, the women who came to them for assistance provided the information that enabled them to better comprehend the problem, develop their vision for change and, in the longer term, secure government funding to support their work. The role of listening to victims in this process cannot be overestimated. Women's liberation refuges thus played a central role in gathering and publicising evidence of domestic violence in the process of responding directly to women's needs.

Unfortunately this was all too late and too far away for Violet Roberts and her son Bruce, who were charged with the murder of their sadistically violent husband and father in the New South Wales town of Pacific Palms in December 1975. Genovese's analysis of this case traces the production of the 'battered body' in law, thus offering another point of access to the history of the emerging discourse of domestic violence in this period.¹⁵ Genovese illustrates that in the four years between the Roberts's imprisonment in 1976 and the successful culmination of the Women Behind Bars-led campaign for their release in 1980, public understandings and articulations of domestic violence became such that the campaign could garner considerable support in the media and the general public.

While Genovese's account is primarily focused on the legal category of the 'battered body' of a domestic violence victim such as Violet Roberts, a survey of the frequency of the term 'domestic violence' in the *Canberra Times* indicates that its use was on the increase during the late 1970s, but only really took hold in the 1980s.¹⁶ The release of Violet Roberts and the established use of the term domestic violence both signalled the impact women's liberation had made on wider discourses of this form of gendered violence, including the creative renderings of artists such as Toni Robertson.

15 Anne Genovese, 'The Battered Body', *Australian Feminist Studies* 12, no. 25 (1997): 91–103, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1997.9994843.

16 This is based on a word search survey of the digital *Canberra Times* archive undertaken in 2016.

Feminist creative representations of domestic violence

Interest in the feminist art movements of the 1970s has been illustrated by more than three decades of scholarship including Sandy Kirby and Louise Mayhew's work on feminist art collectives,¹⁷ the collection of essays about women's film-making edited by Annette Blonski et al. and Mary Tomsic's historical work on this topic,¹⁸ and Anne Vickery's and Zora Simic's histories of women's creative writing and publishing.¹⁹ These accounts have focused on the innovations in approaches to production, ideas about authorship and ownership and narratives of women emerging from male-dominated creative practices into inclusive and politicised environments that facilitated the production and dissemination of their work. It provides important context for reading the artefacts I have chosen. These histories reflect the discussion of women's art that was occurring in the 1970s and generating the ideas that produced the innovative and radical work that is the legacy of this period.

More ephemeral, less recognised visual representations than those created by members of the feminist art and film movements include the illustrations contained in feminist periodicals. As well as publishing and thereby facilitating the new field of feminist inquiry, the many journals and newsletters of this period provided the opportunity for visual, poetic and fictional representations of feminist concerns. The varying life spans and preoccupations of these periodicals tell the story of feminist experimentation, diversity and debate in this period. They are also a rich vein of material for historicising the movement's agenda for change. Within their pages, illustrators and photographers, and poets and fiction writers, contributed to developing and debating this agenda.

17 Sandy Kirby, *Sight Lines: Women's Art and Feminist Perspectives in Australia* (Roseville, NSW: Craftsman House, 1992), 22; Louise Mayhew, *Girls at the Tin Sheds* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2015).

18 Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed and Freda Freiberg, eds, *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia* (Richmond: Greenhouse Publications, 1987); Mary Tomsic, 'We Will Invent Ourselves. The Age of the New Image is at Hand', *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 287–306, doi.org/10.1080/08164640701364679.

19 Ann Vickery, 'The Rise of "Women's Poetry" in the 1970s', *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 265–85, doi.org/10.1080/08164640701378596; Zora Simic, '"Women's Writing" and "Feminism": A History of Intimacy and Estrangement', *Outskirts* 28 (2013), www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-28/zora-simic.

Illustrations from women's liberation movement periodicals

In this section, I examine three images from feminist periodicals that depict women in relation to violence. They reflect the generalised discourse of the enduring threat women face in a patriarchal society, one that restricts and demeans them with the spectre of violation and harm. The image 'Refractory Girl' was published on the second page of the first issue of *Refractory Girl*, the 1972/73 edition. It accompanied a poem of the same title about the women and girls imprisoned at the Parramatta Factory between 1821 and 1848. This poem located the origins of the journal's rebellious spirit in the convict women of the New South Wales penal colony, celebrating their deviance, defiance and survival. And yet the accompanying image spoke of something else. While a more recent reader with knowledge of the feminist historiography of the penal colony is unlikely to struggle to link the image to the subject of the poem, the poem itself made no explicit reference to convict women's subjection or physical injury. Indeed, it sought to emphasise the strength in their refusal to comply with expectations of feminine behaviour and their record of inflicting violence on others: 'The Assault-and-batter/ Parramatta/ Refractory/ FACTORY GIRLS!'. The addition of the drawing complicates the description of the Parramatta Factory inmates in the poem by indicating the physical harm and threat of violence that could also characterise the lives of the impoverished female criminal class that made up the majority of the earliest British migrant women in Australia. The woman at the centre of the image has a bandaged arm in a sling. Her posture, on her knees and attempting to defend herself with a raised arm against an assailant, signals a recent history of violence that continues. The threat to her safety is out of sight yet made present and, by the angle of her body, appears to come from her right. This approaching threat is the only counter to her isolation, and its invisibility suggests its source could be one man or every man. Her lack of class power, which compounds her vulnerability, is legible both in the accompanying poem and the rolled-up sleeve and apron she wears. The prominence of this poem and visual image in the first edition of *Refractory Girl* indicate that a distinctly Australian feminist historiography, sensitive to class and questions of agency, was central to the political project of the journal. As Mary Spongberg has noted: 'The early issues were largely concerned with generating a new Australian

Figure 11.2: 'Refractory Girl', *Refractory Girl*, no. 1, 1972/73, p. 2.

Source: Reproduced courtesy of Ann Curthoys on behalf of the *Refractory Girl* collective, © the artist.

history and an Australian identity that women could embrace'.²⁰ There is a suggestion of continuity, which is reasserted by the journal's analyses of the ongoing political implications of excluding accounts of women's experiences from Australian historiography.

The image in Figure 11.3 was published a couple of years after 'Refractory Girl' with a large, bold title: 'Avoid Rape: Dress Sensibly'. It takes up more than half a page of the first issue of the socialist feminist newspaper *Mabel*, published in December 1975. *Mabel* was based in Sydney and ran for just under two years.²¹ This first issue contained four written references to what would now be described as domestic violence. For example, a testimonial from a resident of Elsie and a long announcement in full-capitals that an International Tribunal aimed at exposing crimes against women was to be held in Brussels. The announcement described a range of types of gendered violence including 'wife beating, rape and molestation of female children', and called on women to make submissions to their local women's liberation group. These items highlighted the issue, albeit without using the term domestic violence. The title of the image is a specific reference to sexual violence, a preoccupation that pre-dated but also assisted in generating a feminist focus on domestic violence. The photograph makes fun of the victim-blaming that characterised legal and public discourses around rape by juxtaposing the idea of safe dressing with an image of a woman on a bicycle whose extremely modest dress puts her in danger of accident and injury. There is an ironic tension in the image between the mobility of the bicycle, a century-old symbol of women's free movement in public space in Australia, and the garment covering all but her face that threatens to catch in the pedal or wheel and mocks the descriptor 'sensibly'. This makes the larger point that women's freedom of movement is compromised by the imperative that they take responsibility for their own safety in the face of an unpredictable threat.

20 Mary Spongberg, 'Australian Women's History in Australian Feminist Periodicals 1971–1988', *History Australia* 5, no. 3 (2008): 73.4.

21 Spongberg, 'Australian Women's History in Australian Feminist Periodicals', 73.3.

Figure 11.3: 'Avoid Rape Dress Sensibly', *Mabel*, no. 1, December 1975, p. 20.

Source: © the artist.

Figure 11.4: 'I Like to Put My Woman on a Pedestal', Barbara O'Brien, *Refractory Girl*, Winter 1975, p. 29.

Source: Reproduced with permission of Sally O'Brien, © Sally O'Brien.

In the same year, 'Woman on a Pedestal' was published in *Refractory Girl* (see Figure 11.4). The drawing accompanied a review by Mary MacLeod of Lee Comer's *Wedlocked Women* (1974). Already known for her feminist critique of Bowlby's maternal deprivation theory,²² here Comer analysed the subjection of women in their roles as wives and mothers, crediting women's liberationists as her collaborators in the development of the ideas she presented. MacLeod makes no explicit reference to violence within marriages in her review, but here the metaphor of women's oppression in these roles is an enactment of violence. This confronting image of the trap

22 Lee Comer, 'The Motherhood Myth', *Refractory Girl*, no. 15/16 (1971).

of idealised femininity emphasises the woman's vulnerable sexualisation. Her naked body is tied with rope that prevents her physical resistance. She suffers the painful and frightening violation of having nails hammered through her feet into the pedestal she is standing on as her attacker speaks or thinks the words 'I like to put my woman on a pedestal'. The image powerfully conveys exposure, humiliation and entrapment. The words and the pedestal itself speak to a visual tradition of conveying raised status. This also invokes the metaphor placing women on a pedestal, which signals the inflation of women's virtue, narrowly defined. The precariousness of such an inflated position is worsened in this case because she is violently imprisoned on the pedestal by rope and nails. The image thus offers a feminist critique of the convention of courtly love as Kate Millett did in 1970 with explicit reference to elevating the love object to the level of a pedestal.²³ The entrapped woman's husband is not obviously clothed or nude. His sexless body dominates as he nails her to the paradoxical pedestal that robs her of all power and bodily integrity even as it raises her body above his.

It is difficult to identify the individual creators of these images. Indeed, where they have signed the work, artists have used only a first name. This practice suggests the feminist ethic of refusing individual ownership of creative work, thereby contesting the notion of 'the artist' and emphasising the collective nature of feminist journal production. These images are from the first half of the 1970s, when domestic violence had yet to be named as such, though gendered violence was clearly emerging as a key concern of the women's movement, both as lived experience and as emblematic of the female condition. Indeed, women's liberation journal collectives were closely linked with the work taking place in the women's refuges. By 1975 there were 12 women's refuges operating, and a growing awareness of the extent of brutality within marriages was evident in feminist periodicals in a number of ways.²⁴ These visual representations reinforced prose writing where it addressed gendered violence directly, but they also signalled to readers that lurking in the larger accounts prose writers offered of institutional marriage and women's history were untold intimate and domestic stories of violence.

23 Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Abacus, 1970), 37.

24 For example, in July 1975, *Scarlet Woman* published a three-page analysis of the benefits and disadvantages for the Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective of seeking government funding, just one example of the ways in which the journals documented women's liberationists developing knowledge of and response to the issue of domestic violence. *Scarlet Woman*, no. 2 (1975): 12–15.

Posters from the Tin Sheds collective

The Sydney University Fine Art Workshop, better known as the Tin Sheds, became a community hub for students and artists from the late 1960s. It was a model of arts access and, while more clearly located within an artistic community than the illustrators working for the journals, also challenged the notion of ‘the artist’.²⁵ Sandy Kirby explains that in 1976 Joan Grounds became the director, an appointment that ‘confirmed the radical orientation of the Tin Sheds and growing impact of feminism there’.²⁶ Toni Robertson was a founding member of the Earthworks Poster Collective,²⁷ which was based at the Tin Sheds from 1972. She was also a core member of the Sydney Women’s Art Movement, which began in 1974 and—among other activities—supported and promoted the work of women artists through the Women’s Art Register. Robertson was a screen printer who applied her skills to poster- and banner-making, media that were ideal for political work. The relatively easy reproduction of posters in particular, and their cost-effectiveness, meant they could be widely distributed to disseminate political messages and information.

In 1977 Robertson made ‘Walls Sometimes Speak’, the title poster for an exhibition of posters that was the brainchild of Robertson and Chips Mackinolty (Figure 11.5). They invited other poster makers including feminist artists Jude Munro and Ann Newmarch and exhibited in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. While, in literal terms, the title of Robertson’s poster refers to the work of all artists who seek to communicate messages by plastering their posters on walls, this poster also evokes feminist representations. The two women, dressed in boiler suits and carrying the tools for their task, are framed at least twice within the poster. They are depicted representing themselves *in situ* and the words ‘Walls Sometimes Speak’ on a neglected public wall. The image and its text highlight interventions in public space as a feminist activist practice. The double meaning of the text signifies both the speaking walls on which posters, and possibly graffiti, appear and feminist work to expose what was once considered private and personal—located within four walls or ‘behind closed doors’—as a political strategy towards describing and naming the oppressive nature of the patriarchal home, including the risk of gendered

25 Kirby, *Sight Lines*, 22.

26 Ibid., 22.

27 While this collective had a fluctuating membership, *Lip* published the following list of members in its 1978/79 edition: Jan Mackay Marie McMahon, Pam Ledden, Di Holdway, Loretta Viececi, Toni Robertson, p. 66.

violence it posed. The visual echo in the image, which repeats itself in ever-diminishing size, poses a threat to those who would silence women who seek to expose abuses that have occurred in private.

Figure 11.5: 'Walls sometimes speak: An exhibition of political posters, Toni Robertson and Chips Mackinolty', 1977, screenprint.

Source: Flinders University Art Museum Collection. Reproduced with permission of Robertson and Mackinolty, © the artists.

Women's poetry

In 1969, Australian poet John Tranter organised a poetry reading where—and I quote him—‘a beautiful naked woman was featured as a “living poem”’.²⁸ Ann Vickery has used this anecdote to underline the struggle women poets faced to carve out a space for their work in the Australian poetry scene. It was the emergence of women's liberation newspapers and periodicals in the early 1970s that expanded the print-space for, and conceptual possibilities of, women's poetry. And then, in 1975, the recently established Outback Press published Kate Jennings's anthology *Mother I'm Rooted*. Of its 12 publications that year, this was the ‘runaway success’ for Outback.²⁹ It sold over 10,000 copies, attracting readers who would not usually buy poetry—a degree of success that rankled male poets at the time.³⁰

Jennings's anthology was a collection by writers both known and unknown. She advertised for contributions in newspapers and drew over 500 responses. Ultimately the anthology included the work of 150 poets. Jennings wrote in the introduction that the anthology ‘slowly metamorphosed into ... a collective statement about the position of women in Australia’ and described its central themes as ‘childbirth, babies, menstruation, housework, female conditioning and feminine perceptions’.³¹ Yet it also contains numerous evocations of male violence—in many cases suggested, in others explicitly described. For example, Judy Gemmel's ‘Into the Sun’ is a poem printed over four pages that describes a woman coming to the decision to leave her relationship. The poem deploys metaphors of light and dark, nightmares and dreams throughout, describing a feminist awakening that enables her to accept that she has suffered a life of gendered oppression. The male partner she addresses attempts to block the light offered by her ‘sisters’ with his imposing frame, but the poem is a refusal of his efforts. The final stanza reads:

28 John Tranter, ‘Four Notes on the Practice of Revolution’, *Australian Literary Studies* 8, no. 2 (1977): 127–35, quoted in Vickery, ‘The Rise of “Women's Poetry” in the 1970s’, 268.

29 Ann Vickery, ‘The Rise of “Women's Poetry”’, 273.

30 Ibid., 279.

31 Kate Jennings, ‘Introduction’, in *Mother I'm Rooted, An Anthology of Australian Women Poets*, ed. Kate Jennings (Fitzroy: Outback Press, 1975).

For I am going anyway,
 Whatever you say or do—
 Although you try, so hard, to bind me
 With tears, fists, works, guilts
 And my still existing love for you –
 I am going anyway,
 Out of nightmares
 Into the sun.³²

The stinging critique of the heterosexual relationship at the centre of 'Into the Sun' hints at violence without centralising it, reflecting the broader feminist activist framework within which domestic violence became increasingly apparent from 1974. Chris Sitka's 'Witch Poem' describes a woman's life as a mix of drudgery, boredom and violence. Here it is the endless work that is emphasised through repetition, but violence is clearly part of the picture of this woman's life:

Day after day she returns to that machine
 and the murderous boredom of her job
 bearing the bruises of her husband's beatings.
 Night after night returns home to screaming children
 And yet more, and more, work.³³

'Witch Poem' is a call to respond with outraged action to the relentlessness and ubiquity of women's oppression, which comes in many intertwined forms. Sitka describes the temptation to be paralysed by the enormity of the task, but the final stanza urges her reader to act purposefully to bring women's suffering to an end. Ann Newmarch's cover for the anthology, a photographic work entitled 'Queen of the Home', depicts the wall of a house with a picket fence and suggests violence to the woman's body in a number of ways (Figure 11.6). Confined between window frames, the crossbars not only evoke the woman's entrapment but also her exile from the interior. The barbed wire threatens any attempt to traverse the picket fence. The woman bends over, her hands protectively grasping the back of her own head, her nakedness an indication of exposure and vulnerability. So while the term domestic violence doesn't appear in the poetry or in Jennings's introduction, it is nevertheless a feature of the images of suffering that the anthology produces.

32 Judy Gemmel, 'Into the Sun', in Jennings, *Mother I'm Rooted*, 186.

33 Chris Sitka, 'Witch Poem', in Jennings, *Mother I'm Rooted*, 487.

Figure 11.6: 'Queen of the Home', Ann Newmarch. Cover art for Kate Jennings, ed., *Mother I'm Rooted, An Anthology of Australian Women Poets*, 1975.

Source: Reproduced with permission of Ann Newmarch, © the artist.

While *Mother I'm Rooted* reached a wide audience and became something of a classic, feminist periodicals also published poetry that evoked heart-rending scenes of violence in intimate relationships. A striking example by Kate Llewellyn called 'FINISHED' was published in *Refractory Girl* in September 1977. Each stanza begins 'there'll be no more', regularising the rhythm of the words, but the poem is divided in two. The first three stanzas describe scenes of domestic pleasure, both companionate and sexual. These descend in the second half of the poem to scenes of anger and violence; the deterioration of the relationship until love is extinguished.

there'll be no more
hits across my mouth love
and crawling on the floor

there'll be no more chainsmoking listening to you curse love
or smiling drinking more

there'll be no more crying because you rage love
or dancing up your drive

there's no more
love love.³⁴

The context throughout is the home: the verandah, the floor, the drive. While the man the poem addresses leaves and returns each day, the protagonist remains anticipating and then dreading his arrival. Domestic peace and pleasure are expunged by violence and pain.

The following year in *Vashti's Voice*, 'Where Have I Gone Wrong?' appeared. This was billed as 'a short story by Rose'. As well as describing a woman's husband arriving home late and drunk and his ensuing violence, the piece contains passages of inner dialogue in which victim/protagonist worries about the children, considers suicide and weighs up her options for escape. Finally it comes to this:

To her surprise she stopped crying. *She is a bashed wife. She had to admit it to herself and she knew that she was not the only one.*

There had been lots of talks on the radio about how women were leaving their husbands, and that there have been some houses established to accommodate women and children. *There seemed to be a new strength in her.*

34 Kate Llewellyn, 'FINISHED', *Refractory Girl*, no. 15 (1977): 45.

Without wasting any time she picked up the telephone book.
Maybe they could accommodate her?
 That is what she needs.
 Just for a short time.³⁵

By the time this short story was published in 1978, there were women's refuges across the country for which government funding had become more or less assured and stable.³⁶ Reference to 'talks on the radio' suggests a broader conversation was taking place about domestic violence. Indeed, Australian feminists began penetrating the mass media from the mid-1970s. The Australian Women's Broadcasting Cooperative was established within the national broadcaster in 1975, the same year 'The Coming Out Show' began. This radio program, made by women and for women, brought feminist issues, including gendered violence, to a national audience.³⁷ 'Where Have I Gone Wrong?', a creative representation of consciousness-raising that made clear to readers of *Vashti's Voice* that help was available, served as a kind of community service notice, an encouragement to women to identify their situation knowing that there was somewhere they could flee to. Here women's liberation explicitly facilitated women's road to safety, responding to an increasingly recognised need in the community. This example, of course, is barely the tip of the iceberg of women's creative fiction and nonfiction writing in the 1970s. There is a wealth of women's liberation publications, including novels and anthologies of short stories and other work published and extracted in periodicals that were countercultural and experimental in their strategies for challenging representations of women and femininity and conveying experiences of domestic violence.

Two women's liberation movement films

The 1970s was a time of optimism among Australian film-makers generally. While growth in this industry and some government support increased the possibility of feminist film-makers finding a place within it, Mary Tomsic explains that women were critical of practices within this expanding industry and of some of the films that proved the most

35 'Where Have I Gone Wrong?', *Vashti's Voice* 22 (1978): 18.

36 See Eva Cox, 'Social Policy', in *Oxford Companion to Australian Feminism*, ed. Barbara Caine, Moira Gatens, Emma Grahame, Jan Larbalestier, Sophie Watson and Elizabeth Webby (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 307–8; and Murray, 'The Origins and Development of the Australian Women's Refuge Movement'.

37 Katharine Lumby, 'Media', in Caine et al., *Oxford Companion to Australian Feminism*, 217.

commercially successful, such as the *Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) and *Alvin Purple* (1973).³⁸ A number of women's and feminist film collectives emerged from 1971 promoting women's place in film-making and women's subject matter in films. Tomsic has documented their histories, exploring the distinctive aims of feminist film-makers and the ways in which they defined their success.³⁹ Debate about what constituted feminist techniques in film-making was part and parcel of involvement in the feminist film-making community and there was plenty of work to discuss.

Tomsic's analysis of Margot Nash and Robin Laurie's 1976 film *We Aim to Please* describes its exemplary feminist techniques and content.⁴⁰ I have included the film in my selection here for its depiction of gendered violence, but its representational strategies are pertinent. The film is neither narrative nor documentary but rather a pastiche of fragmented conversations, powerful images and improvised performances by Nash and Laurie. It contains in-jokes intended to make women laugh and to confront male viewers. In one scene, the two women write in lipstick on each other's bodies, an example of the film-makers taking control of the representations of their bodies and appropriating the tools of feminine adornment to political effect. Sounds and images evoke physical and sexual violence against women, standing in for the visual portrayal of the victim. Its mood shifts between humour and violence. At one point, a glass bottle is thrown and smashes against a cut watermelon lying in the bushes, a chilling soundscape eliminates any doubt that this moment is intended to evoke a violent, probably sexual, attack. This film both explores and challenges women's subjection and violation in a number of ways, suggesting violence that could be located both within and beyond intimacy and domesticity.

In 1980—the year of the Violet Roberts release campaign—Sarah Gibson, Susan Lambert, Martha Ansara and Pat Fiske made a film that directly addressed domestic violence. After years of experimentation with the form, this was widely regarded as having successfully conveyed the issue using techniques of representation that kept it firmly within a feminist frame. Using just one set, a fashionable and comfortable bedroom, the film privileges sound over image. In her analysis of this relationship, Jane Madsen

38 Tomsic, 'We Will Invent Ourselves', 289–90.

39 Ibid., 290.

40 Ibid., 292.

has identified five categories of sound: 'song, music, voice, sound effects and atmospheric sound'.⁴¹ The main action is in the sound-collage including snippets of interviews with women staying in Sydney women's refuges. Songs are carefully selected to critique popular notions of romantic love, and the smashing of crockery signifies violent episodes. The audience hears the anonymous, invisible voices of these women. There is no voice-over, and no individual story is presented as coherent and complete, or as more or less important than the others. The film's single set reminds the viewer of the intimacy that at some point characterised the relationships that enter the film in spoken snapshots. While commentary has focused on sound, the set of white wicker furniture and colourful, floral bedding, cushions and carpet contributes to the shifting mood of the piece. To begin with, all is intact. The bed is made, cushions artfully arranged and magazines neatly stacked. The women's voices describe early expectations of their intimate relationships and the beginning of relationship breakdown. As the horror of the descriptions of violence intensifies, the camera moves more rapidly and the full colour spectrum is replaced with a blue and then a red filter. The red hues coincide with women speaking of weapons and injuries: an attempted stabbing, burning with cigarettes and boiling water, and internal injuries. The blue tones return for a discussion of sexual violence and the status of rape in relationships. Finally, as women describe their decisions to leave and life after the relationship, order is restored in the bedroom. The bed is now made again and a sense of visual calm is restored. *Behind Closed Doors* offers an explicit representation of domestic violence that is primarily aural but uses a domestic space that is empty of people to assist in conveying the meaning of the words and sounds heard.

The important place of this film in the history of domestic violence is explained in the story of its making and its use. At the 2017 Sydney Film Festival there was a screening and discussion of the film. Megan Nash interviewed the feminism and film section curator, Susan Charlton, who described the important connection between the film-makers and their audience, a connection that was established before the film was complete:

Like Susan Lambert said ... it was like an early form of crowdfunding. She and Sarah Gibson did a rough cut of *Behind Closed Doors* and screened it at women's centres and places like that, and people threw money in for it to be finished. So the films came out of this

41 Jane Madsen, 'Listening at Closed Doors: A consideration of the Use of Sound in *Behind Closed Doors*', in Blonski, Creed and Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling!*

community and they were for this community, and people used to hire them or buy them—schools, universities, health centres, women's refuges, hospitals. It was quite a successful business.⁴²

Susan Sheridan has further attested to the political utility and effect of the film. She remembers how useful it was for teaching women's studies classes on the issue of gendered violence. It was the very absence of explicit imagery that rendered it a feminist representation that she could share with her students without risking a voyeuristic viewing of women's suffering.⁴³

Conclusion

Creative representations including still and moving images and creative writing contributed to the process of identifying domestic violence as a specific aspect of gendered violence that should command the attention of the women's movement. The challenge of exposing, naming and analysing this issue was met in a range of media and registers that reflected the complexity of the task and the breadth of intellectual and creative talent that the movement boasted. The examples explored in this chapter assist in charting the increasing awareness of gendered and domestic violence within the women's movement itself, which, in turn, informed a larger public conversation that identified domestic violence as a public policy issue. They also provide clear evidence of the cultural renaissance that played a central role in 1970s feminist activism, the achievements of which cannot be disentangled from the intellectual developments that shifted ways of thinking about gender and power in this period. While I have sought to identify the role of creative activism in this particular history of 1970s feminism, there remains an opportunity to canvass a much larger sample of creative works, particularly writing, and to chart in more detail the emergence of particular representational strategies that spoke to the complexities of the experiences of domestic violence and the sophisticated feminist discussions about how these were best conveyed.

42 Susan Charlton (in conversation with Megan Nash), 'Feminism and Film—A Roundtable Discussion with Curator Susan Charlton', 1 July 2017, accessed 28 October 2017, fourthreefilm.com/2017/07/feminism-film-a-roundtable-discussion-with-curator-susan-charlton/.

43 Private correspondence with the author.

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