

CQUniversity Australia

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Figments of Eliza - A dramatic interlude about place

Abstract:

This work uses the creative nonfiction form of a dramatic script to explore the story of Eliza Fraser and a woman's relationship to place. Using questions of relevance to the contemporary explorer juxtaposed with the documented history of Eliza Fraser's experiences of coastal Queensland after a shipwreck in 1836, documentary evidence and place-based research were transformed to create a one women show. In shaping the arc of the script, consideration was given to the concept of a tragic hero and the female version of the 'hero's journey' (Campbell, 1990; Murdock, 1990) including domestic imprisonment, journey through the underworld, symbolic death, discovery of the mother figure and female tradition, magical flight and rescue. Eliza's alienation from the place and its people raises questions about what it means to belong, both then and now.

Biographical note:

Susan Davis is a Senior Lecturer at CQ University, Noosa. She has been devising and writing scripts for more than 20 years, many in her prior professional life as a drama educator and Performing Arts Head of Department and more recently as director for youth, regional and international performance projects. Sue has written curriculum and assessment materials for syllabus and assessment projects, has presented and published her work about drama and new media at state, national and international levels.

Keywords:

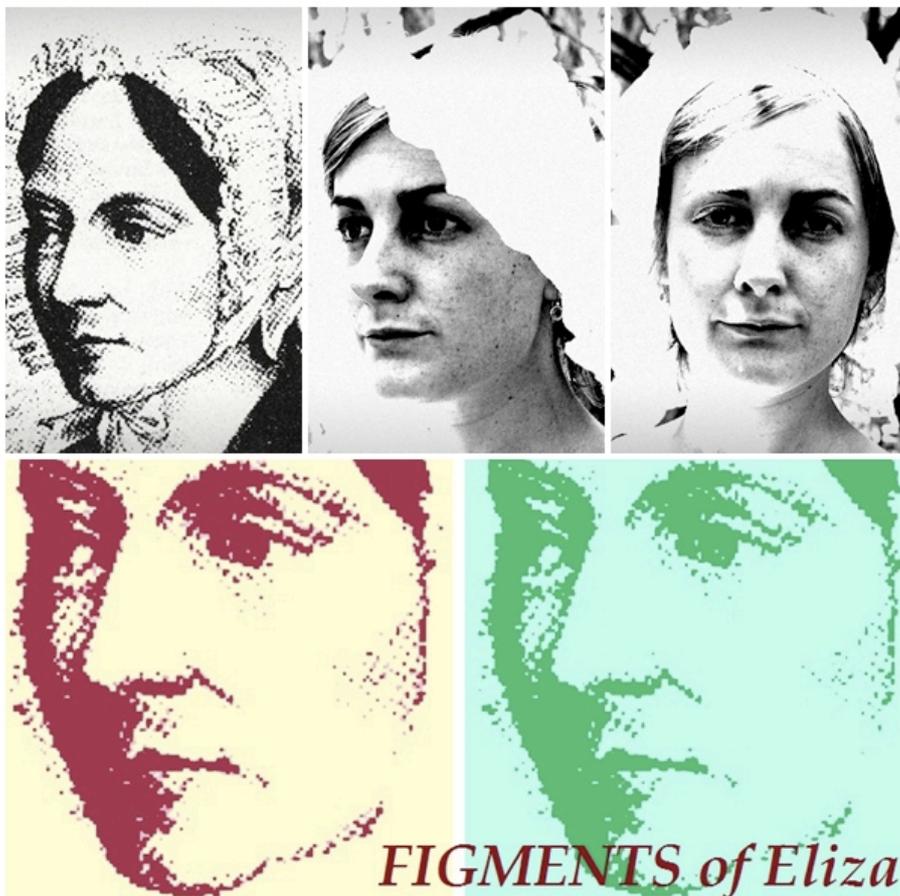
Creative nonfiction – drama – the heroine's journey

Characters:

ELIZA: Eliza Fraser is a woman in her late thirties who is a mother of three. Her husband was captain of the vessel the *Stirling Castle*. She was accompanying him on the voyage because of concerns about his health and wellbeing. Her initial confidence and assurance is challenged by certain men within the crew and by events that follow.

VOICEOVER ELIZA (VO. ELIZA): This Eliza is like the storyteller and diarist. The Voiceover role was also created to help create a more dynamic interplay and enable the performer to focus on physical presence and enactment. For the premiere performance this role was pre-recorded as part of a soundscape that played throughout the piece. This role could also be performed live and it is possible to experiment with splitting the role in different ways.

MALE VOICEOVER (M. VO): This voice sets the scene and location and at times contributes as if a character. This can be performed live or pre-recorded.



SCENE 1 – How long until you belong?

(A woman sits half turned from the audience in the pose of the one existing portrait of Eliza Fraser).

ELIZA: How long do you have to live in a place before you belong?

(She goes to a trunk and opens it; she takes out several key objects for telling the story and prepares to face the audience.)

VO. ELIZA: It might belong to you, but do you belong to it? Do you have to feel it, eat from it, build from it, lie in it?

How long does it take to know yourself and what you are capable of? You might believe certain things of yourself, but actions can betray all that you hold dear.

ELIZA: I have a story to tell you ... about finding myself in a place where I didn't belong. I could ask of you some sympathy, but many of you have already made up your mind. I was a most ordinary woman, a wife and a mother. I did not desire riches, fame, or infamy. I never thought about my name living on, or imagined I could be called such names. I have been called a liar, a victim, a thief, a sideshow spectacle. Perhaps some truth is to be found in all these labels. To be honest, I only wished to survive and see my children grown ... to keep heart and soul alive.

But the stories afterwards... the scandal sheets gone wild ... sympathy, horror, titillation, atrocity.

VO. ELIZA: How long does it take?

... to be saved, to betray, to forgive, to forget?

SCENE 2 - First night

Sfx: Ocean sounds, creaking of ship

M. VO: May 1836, Sydney.

ELIZA: My name is Eliza Fraser, I am 37 years old and a mother of three, Jane 15, James 11 and David 6. *(Rolls a long shawl up and places it under her skirts)* And soon to give birth to my fourth, hopefully after we arrive in Singapore. We head out from Sydney Harbour today. My husband Captain James Fraser is at the helm, then there's the crew, 18 sea-faring men, and ... myself!

(She unpacks her familiar things and begins to embroider)

VO. ELIZA: Born in a time when a woman's lot is largely that of wife, mother, and household chatelaine, I have managed all these roles and then some. Having three children and a husband whose health is ailing has forced me to take on an active role in running his affairs; it is this role that has drawn me into my current dilemma.

ELIZA: So, those of you who are wives and mothers let me ask you this. If your husband were the family bread-winner... and quite unwell, would you be pleased to bid farewell to him as he set sail around the world for six whole months? And would you be happy to do so if he were sailing to a place where he'd sailed before... and nearly perished there in a shipwreck? Well, I was not, so here I am ... about to say farewell to Sydney town from the decks of the Stirling Castle. I hope that my presence will help my husband, with his diet and his duties.

VO. ELIZA: So it is an unlikely vision I present, when I mount the deck and call orders to the men. If my husband is not near, they feign deafness or mumble oaths.

ELIZA: Did you hear that? They're whispering about me again.

I know they call me a 'she-devil' and a 'vixen'. Some of the men resent my requests, when I ask them to clean, to repair, to eat, to wash, to wait. I thank the lord for good men such as first mate Charles Brown and our cousin John Baxter. I would fear for my very safety if left alone with men such as Youlden and Stone.

Quibble and agitate as they may, they will have to learn to live with me, until we reach Singapore and my delivery.

VO. ELIZA: If they wish to be paid at the end of this voyage they will learn to hold their tongues and mend their ways. I long to retreat to my needlework and more gentle pursuits, but now is not the time. It is our first day at sea with a new crew and order must be established.

ELIZA: Excuse me men; the Captain says it is time to scrub the decks. (*She pauses but there is obviously no response*)

The Captain has asked me to tell you to scrub the decks ...thank you. (*Pauses again*)

(*Demands*) You must scrub the decks, then repair the long boat. That is an order!

SCENE 3 – Life all at sea

M. VO: May 18, 1836

(Sfx: Wind, seagulls cry)

ELIZA: We have made good speed since leaving Sydney Heads. A steady breeze is blowing and we have passed entrances to the Hawkesbury and Hunter Rivers.

VO. ELIZA: We now move into territory that is less well explored. I admit only to myself a sense of disquiet as we approach the Torres Strait and the scene of my husband's earlier mishap.

ELIZA: You look out to the land and it does not welcome you. There are no candles burning, no houses, no signs of civilisation. What beauty others might see is lost on me. That green is no true green; the sky's hue offends the eye. There is comfort only to be found in all that is familiar.

(Mimes the pouring of cups of tea, stirs in sugar and hands the cup as if to her husband then picks up her embroidery)

VO. ELIZA: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
Bless the bed that I lie on.
Four corners to my bed,
Four angels round my head.
One to watch and one to pray,
And two to bear my fears away.

ELIZA: If you could stop life and halt its progress, like stopping the hands of a clock, where would you pause it? At a moment you would savour for its sheer brilliance and joy? Or perhaps one more simple representing contentment. If that power were mine, I would go back to breakfast of that morn, of fried bread, a companionable silence and a perfect, sweet cup of tea...

SCENE 4 – One moment

(SFX Rain and wind, and then crashing timber sounds)

M. VO: May 21, 1836

VO. ELIZA: It was just after 9 o'clock in the evening, I was in the hallway when we crashed and I was thrown to the floor.

(SFX Screeching sound as ships grinds onto the reef).

(Eliza falling, or struggling to crawl across the floor)

ELIZA: What's happening?

The water's pouring in, it's all around

M. VO: It's a reef; we've struck a reef.

VO. ELIZA: The ship tipped to the side, I struggled to make it on deck.

(Screams and cries of surprise, anger and frustration)

ELIZA: We're stuck fast on a reef, there's water gushing in the hull.

VO. ELIZA: My paper role as she-captain was torn apart as the men ignored both myself and my husband as he called out his commands.

M. VO: Cut down the sails, and move on to the mast. Perhaps we can swing her around.

ELIZA: Why won't they listen to him, what are they doing?

M. VO: Prepare the boats. Pack what you can.

ELIZA: Get provisions to the longboat...but what about the repairs?

M. VO: Take food, water, clothing, and all that is most precious.

ELIZA: Clothing, food, what else, what is most precious? *(As she grabs a small box)*

M. VO: Abandon ship!

15 lbs of salt beef, 15 lbs salt pork 50 lbs hard biscuit, jar of butter, jar of tripe, captain's jams & jellies, 3 gallons brandy, half keg of ale, captain's sea chest, 3 trunks of Mrs Fraser's clothes, 2 sextants, 2 chronometers, 1 axe, 2 pistols, 2 muskets and 1 fowling piece.

ELIZA: The water, the water, the water's coming in the longboat too... but where are the kegs of water? *(She looks around frantically as she begins to row)*

(Sfx: Sound of rowing)

VO. ELIZA: Two boats, an 18-foot pinnace and a 22-foot long boat. I am on the long boat. Myself, the captain and 11 of the men.

M. VO: The repairs are not holding. Start bailing ... NOW.

SCENE 5 – Weep no more

M. VO: May 26, 1836

(ELIZA sits on the trunk as if in a rowing boat, she begins to row).

VO. ELIZA: Four days after the wreck.... after the Stirling Castle struck a reef, in an area where our maps showed none should be. But there is no arguing with a sinking ship, nor with a babe whose time has come, untimely though it be.

ELIZA: At first I wept with fear, and pain from the bleeding blisters on my hands, but then the pain from deep within became more primal still.

(She begins to whimper and then cry out as she goes into labour)

The babe ... *(She draws a shawl out from under her skirt and wraps it up like a babe)*

VO. ELIZA: And so I bore the babe, there in a longboat, lost at sea, surrounded by 11 men, in another sinking boat.

The babe - *(she slowly moves to the side and casts the bundle gently down)* a bundle cast afloat one dark and dismal night. I tried not to look, knew such a sight would haunt me still, but could not drag my eyes away. It barely took one breath...

ELIZA: It barely took one breath, in the struggle to clear the waters from its chest, born into a sinking boat, launched from a sinking ship. What hope could there be for life to flourish in such a watery confine?

VO. ELIZA: My eyes are dry, salt-encrusted but not with tears. The salt coats my eyes, my skin, my hair, my clothes. My lips and hands are blistered and the skin peels from my face. My throat is parched; at first with grief but now, just thirst.

ELIZA: It barely took one breath.....

The weeping from my eyes has stopped but my body weeps. The milk seeps from my breast, my womb weeps for its lost encumbrance.

The soul withers but the body endures ...*(she whispers as the voiceover starts)* ... that is how to survive such a time.

VO. ELIZA: The soul withers but the body endures – that is how to survive.

SCENE 6 - Hankering

(Sfx drifting water sounds as a boat becalmed)

M. VO: June 1836

(ELIZA lays out fabric as a sail in an attempt to catch rain)

VO. ELIZA: I believe we have been at sea for three weeks, none can be sure. We landed for a time on an island, searched for food and water, found a little... but not enough to keep us long.

ELIZA The salted meat and jellies are gone. We have no water. We try to catch water when it rains. I lay out my skirts to soak up dew and mix it with sea water to slake my thirst.

VO. ELIZA: Others have attempted drinking seawater alone but their health has not been sustained.

ELIZA: There is yet a little sea biscuit, but most of it has spoiled.

(ELIZA reaches for imagined objects, mimes catching them, eating them, putting them on, appears happy and content)

Today I dreamt of new bonnets and babies... of fresh raspberries and cream, and embroidered silk scarves.

VO. ELIZA: Every day I make myself think of something beautiful, of something simply perfect. And there are oranges cut into eight ... pudding with nutmeg and raisins ... and a bright pink bonnet with a silk satin ribbon

ELIZA: ...pudding with nutmeg and raisins ... and a bright pink bonnet with a silk satin ribbon.

SCENE 7 - Hungering

(Sfx: Thunder rumble, then male whispers.)

(ELIZA licks her fingers as if licking sticky remains, she reacts as if cut/hurt, sucks her finger, looks at it, contemplates it and sucks it again more enthusiastically)

ELIZA: Have you ever tasted your own blood? Could you taste that of another? I have tasted my blood, as I soothe my bleeding hands. It tastes of salt, sweetness, hints of metal. It is not repulsive, but could I consume the flesh of another? There are others here who contemplate such madness.

VO. ELIZA: They whisper in the night, tell tales of starving desperation, of barbarities and degradation. Each draws a straw.... The loser (*she points into the audience*) sacrificed to provide food for the living.

ELIZA: Some here argue that we should land the vessel ... take our chance on these cursed shores, find food, pray for friendly natives who might

help us. My husband disagrees. He reminds us of Captain Bligh and his survival after mutiny on the *Bounty*. On a vessel of this size he charted a journey of three thousand miles. With little food and water he reached his destination with only one man lost.

VO. ELIZA: Could we be that fortunate? There are other tales less favourable, of skirmishes and hostilities. And these whispered, desperate tales.

ELIZA: ... whispered, desperate tales. Of blood, of flesh, of bones, of taste ... suspicion and survival.

SCENE 8 – Ungainly ghosts

M. VO: Late June, 1836

M. VO: And when they reached the fatal shore,
Its name is call'd Wide Bay,
The savages soon them espied,
Rush'd down and seiz'd their prey,
And bore their victims in the boat,
Into their savage den,
To describe the feelings of those poor souls
Is past the art of men.
(Note: from Wreck of the Stirling Castle, 1837, by John Curtis)

ELIZA: We straggle ashore, stumbling as if drunken after the weeks at sea

VO. ELIZA: I am not sure if I should be proud or embarrassed to say that the goods we unloaded included several trunks of my possessions... what remained of my clothes and my best crockery.

ELIZA: And then there was is this *(opens a small wooden box to show clothing for her baby)* ... precious remnants of a former life. Things that are familiar.

VO. ELIZA: It is ironic that the place where we landed came to bear our name, when my husband insisted we should not land there. K'gari it was called, now Fraser Island. For us, it was a reluctant landing, driven by fear and a fragile hope.

SCENE 9 – At their mercy

ELIZA: Those men, what do they want? Are they going to kill us? What can we offer them?

VO. ELIZA: Those men ... they could have killed us if they chose. Could have stripped us, beaten us, abused us.

That is a tale I later told, and some of it did come to pass.

Those men ... to begin with they just watched us.. but would they help?

ELIZA: Can you help us? (*As if hiding behind husband*) Water... can you give us fresh water? And food we need food?

Please, we won't hurt you. What do you want, this? Here then. James, James, what are you doing? What they want to see your... ! Put that away....

VO. ELIZA: It wasn't much, the food they gave, but share they did. This first group, exchanging gifts and then watching from afar.

(ELIZA watches food thrown to the ground in front of her, picks it up and savours a bite.)

ELIZA: More?

VO. ELIZA: We set up camp, traded more clothes! Tried to repair the boat yet again. But the winds were our enemies. Half our party deserted, eager to walk to Moreton Bay.

ELIZA: What do you see when you look at this land? For me... endless miles of ocean and sand. Nothing looks like fruit that I know, nothing like the comforts of our modern life. But what would you think, what would you do without the trappings of your life around you?

We are at the mercy of this land, and its people.

SCENE 10 – My naked self

M. VO: July 1836

ELIZA: As a child did you ever play this game? “Imagine you are marooned on a desert island and could only take... two things... what would you take”? This assumes you have some choice in the matter. I now know the answer to that question. My wedding ring and these earrings. These are the things that remain.

What do you want? We've nothing left to give. Go away, shoo, leave us be.

(ELIZA mimes having her clothes stripped from her and reacts to being inspected throughout the following ...)

VO. ELIZA: Our clothes stripped away, our bodies exposed. Rough hands inspecting parts, which never see the light of day. The natives involved ... are different from the first, they steal and they yell, demand and insist. They poke and prod, want more and more.

ELIZA: But there are some things you can't have, some things that are mine. *(ELIZA ties on her 'string of leaves' in a ritualistic way as if being helped by another person, she ties the ring and earrings on as well.)* And now I wear a fringe of leaves, tied by my love, protecting that given by my love.

VO. ELIZA: The ring and earrings ... now hidden beneath a fringe of leaves.

SCENE 11 – A woman's work

M. VO: Near Hook Point, August 1836

(Sfx: Australian bush sounds and underlying ominous tone.)

ELIZA: I have no food; no clothes and now, I no longer have the comfort of my husband's presence. There is no one I can speak to, to encourage or consort with. Whether to share us around like trophies or to prolong our lives, I cannot fathom, but our party has been divided between the native groups. I was left alone on the beach... before the women found me.

My life, now that of a slave. It takes all day to find a meagre meal, digging, dragging, climbing, wading. I search for food and do their bidding.

VO. ELIZA: When I became attached to this clan, the women insisted I go on their foraging trips. They laughed at my inadequacies and insisted I learn how to find their bungwal roots. Then tired of my failings, their laughter turned to disdain. One of the women, I shall call her K'gari for this place, one woman showed compassion.

ELIZA: K'gari... you are the only one...

VO. ELIZA: When first she led me away from the others, I expected the worst. I thought she might trade me to another group... but she sat me down and took my hands. She began to point at the bites and swellings on my arms and there was concern in her eyes, not contempt.

ELIZA: Yes, the bites.. the cuts... the stings.

VO. ELIZA: When she began to rub this ungent on my limbs, I pulled away at first.

ELIZA: What is that? (*smelling*) ... fat... charcoal?

VO. ELIZA: She continued in her ministrations and I admit there was relief to be found.

ELIZA: Now I'm black... like you.

Since then she has shown me favour on occasion. Morsels of food, soft bark to sleep on, bright coloured feathers and necklaces of shells. These simple gifts, virtual treasures within this meagre existence.

Thank you K'Gari ... you are the only one.

SCENE 12 – A child

ELIZA: (Sings) *My bonnie lie over the ocean
My bonnie lie over the sea
My bonnie lie over the ocean
Oh bring back my bonnies to me.*

A child lies in my arms... he nuzzles my breast and grips my thumb. You may think I am dreaming, or delirious perhaps, but this time you would be mistaken. The child is real, flesh and bone and dark of skin.

VO. ELIZA: When she brought the child to me I was not sure what she expected. He was a sickly child, crying and whimpering. But this is my job... to mind the child, for much of the day left in my care. I cannot say I relish the task; it is enough to maintain myself. There is such strangeness and familiarity in the holding of a child in my arms. When he sought comfort, I resisted initially. He clung on though, demanding and persisting.

ELIZA: Here is a babe in my arms, where one should have been.

SCENE 13 – Darkest nights and prayers for dawn

(*Sfx: Dingo howls and night bush sounds*)

(*ELIZA shivers violently, wakes, and becomes agitated, scratching, rubbing, searching, and then remembers what has happened and goes still*)

VO. ELIZA: I am so cold and frozen to my very heart. Through every layer of my body the cold has crept. It is impossible to sleep. I shiver, I scratch, I

try to wrap the bark about me and creep towards the campfire embers. I am barred from the native's huts; I sleep with the dogs and the fleas. I wait for the dawn and wonder if it will be my last.

ELIZA: And now... I must tell you most reluctantly ... some terrible news. My husband is dead. Speared through the shoulder, he died in my arms. Buried in a nameless grave, he has passed from this world to join Our Lord and Saviour. Do not cry though, it gladdens my heart, I must be happy for him... he is no longer suffering. I envisage him at the Lord's table, in his finest captain's garb. He is healthy and happy, enjoying a sumptuous feast. Friends congratulate him on his life's work ... and Jesus smiles, as James is welcomed into the heavenly kingdom. Angels sing, harps ripple and my dear, sweet James is honoured and at peace. (*She breaks down, silently weeping... it is all a charade.*)

VO. ELIZA: (Singing) *Gentle Jesus meek and mild
Look upon this little child
Little ones to him belong
I am weak but he is strong.
Yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me
Yes Jesus loves me, the bible tells me so.*

ELIZA: I still believe, I still believe, I will believe.

I could let myself slip away, but I will fight to the bitter end to prevent my children ending as orphans in a poor house. (*Her entreaty*) God of miracles and wonders, you who parted the Red Sea, brought plague and pestilence, protected Daniel in the Lion's den and raised Lazarus from the dead ... please show some mercy for this poor wretched woman now. (*Growing angry*) The laws of nature are no barrier to you, you control the forces and command the universe. Lord, send me a sign!

SCENE 14 – Bargains with knights or knaves

(*Sfx: crickets, nighttime noises*)

M. VO: There the ferryman stands, who rules the dreary coast
A sordid god: down from his hairy chin
A length of beard descends, uncombed, unclean;
His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire;
A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.

(*ELIZA lies as if sleeping but opens her eyes as if seeing a man standing over her*)

VO. ELIZA: When first his face appeared above me I felt certain I had been visited by a ghost. The man's face weather-beaten to such an extent he seemed native, but the contours of his visage suggested not. He signalled for me to remain silent and follow him away from the camp. Was this man my knight, my deliverance, my sign? I dare not believe yet but followed anyway,

We reach the water's edge, a river? A passage that must be crossed.

(Sfx: Ominous undertones... building throughout the next paragraph. ELIZA becomes prone during the following section, opens her legs and responds to being ravaged.)

ELIZA: As Virgil described the ferryman so might I. And like the tortured souls who must pay a price to take the boat and cross the river Styx, from the world of the living to the world of the dead, I too had a price to pay.

VO. ELIZA: My knight was in fact a knave whose heart was as dark as Hades. His leering smile revealed his dark desire, his belief that my compliance was unquestioned. I railed against bargaining away my last shred of dignity, though bargain indeed I must.

(Sounds stops)

What is most exacting to endure? Striking the bargain, enacting it, or living with the consequences?

ELIZA: I can tell you now that the nightmares that repossess you again and again are indeed more difficult to live with than the act itself.

SCENE 15 – Walkabout to where?

M. VO: Near Inskip Point and Rainbow Beach

(Sfx: Boat in water being rowed, then wading in water, then footsteps in sand.)

VO. ELIZA: Reaching the other side delivered no salvation. To hide our tracks, we waded in water for miles.

ELIZA: We walk and then we walk. Walking without talking... silently walking ... endless beach line, sand and water, water and sand, water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink... no time to stop and forage.

VO. ELIZA: Pain shoots and dulls, old injuries and new, my foot, my shoulder, broken skin, broken wings. As my mind began to wander, we headed inland. Dunes and swamps, creeks, more water. Any hope that we

were close to Moreton Bay was shattered as we were surrounded by natives, whether by accident or intent.

(Sfx: didgeridoo, mumbled voices, excited sounds.)

ELIZA: Where... is Moreton Bay?

Take me to Moreton Bay?

VO. ELIZA: Like a carnival doll I was passed from one to another and finally stationed in one of their shelters. I was the object of considerable interest and spectacle, the curious brought to look upon the she-ghost, the first female one they'd seen.

ELIZA: Stop... no more *(pleads with them)* please leave me alone....

(She curls into a tiny ball)

VO. ELIZA: Now I am entirely alone, no James, no Baxter, no K'gari, no hope. No protest from my lips, no tears burn my lids, no fight drives my limbs. I close my eyes to the world, prepare to surrender. I dream of floating on gentle waves, of delicate arms holding me and caressing me as I drift in balmy waters beneath perfumed pink skies.

(Sfx: Water, drifting sounds, gradual thumping beat starts underneath, and builds louder.)

VO. ELIZA: Sweetness turns to dust and my dreams of heaven are peopled by angry giants, faces grotesquely painted, full of accusation. Pounding rhythms surround me, invade me. The throbbing in my body beats an angry rhythm with the stomping cries of corroboree.

(ELIZA sits up suddenly, shaken, feverish, in agony)

ELIZA: Who's there, what's happening?

James, is that you, have you come for me?

SCENE 16 - Salvation

M. VO: August 17, Fig tree point near Lake Cootharaba

VO. ELIZA: I was quite literally swept away. Swept high into the air. The jolting gait of my possessor signalled this as no heavenly intervention. If I were to be rescued by angels they would surely spirit me away with nary a bump. The clouds could be seen through the treetops but they did not rush to greet me. The moon laughed at my calamity and the stars twinkled in amusement.

ELIZA: Who are you? Where are you taking me? Put me down!

VO. ELIZA: John Graham was a convict man transported to Moreton Bay. He had escaped and lived with the natives for some years before being recaptured. He had volunteered to assist in my rescue and through this act he demonstrated the most noble of sentiments. “I have come to save you Ma’am” he said, and in that moment, I knew that he would.

(ELIZA unties the vine from around her, replaces her wedding ring on her finger, unwraps a bundle of clothes, and dresses.)

M. VO: Around her loins was part of a pair of trousers, they covered her thighs, wound round with vines, as well for delicacy as for the preservation of her marriage and earrings.

You never saw such an object. Although only 38 years, she looked like an old woman of 70, black, dreadfully crippled. She caught my hand and burst into tears, sunk down quite exhausted. ... a mere skeleton, her legs a mass of sores.

ELIZA: Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you..

(She becomes aware of her sad and sorry state and is mortified. She wraps a blanket around herself before looking up and finding the energy to go on.)

VO. ELIZA: And so we set up that beach again, walking through the night, fearful of being captured once again. Lieutenant Otter and Mr Graham showed the greatest kindness, supporting me, carrying me, ministering to me.

SCENE 17 – My Ebenezer

M. VO: Double Island Point, August 22

(She arranges the stones, one on top of the other)

ELIZA: Before I leave this fatal shore, I must give thanks and raise a stone, an Ebenezer. I must honour my James, our captain ... and honour our Lord and Saviour.

VO. ELIZA: “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” In this act we follow the example of the prophet Samuel. He said these words as he erected a stone to celebrate the help that God gave Israel. He called it an “Ebenezer”.

ELIZA: I also follow the example of my husband. When we first landed upon these shores my husband gave thanks, declaring, “Hitherto hath the

Lord helped us". I had turned from God and faith, but with this act I now restore my faith anew.

My monument might not stand throughout the ages, but it represents the truth, and one that my husband believed. The Lord will help us and I will survive. Vale to my Captain who still believed.

And now I leave this place, this part of my tale is told. I lived on this land, ate from it, slept on it, but it is not mine. I don't belong. I long for home.

SCENE 18 – Survivors

M. VO: Eliza Fraser and six of the crew survived the wreck of the Stirling Castle and events that followed.

Robert Darge, Henry Youlden and Joseph Corralis were found on Bribie Island by Lieutenant Otter, who led the rescue party to find Eliza.

Robert Dayman & Little Bob Carey were found at Lake Cooroibah

John Baxter was found on Fraser Island

The only survivor from the pinnace was Robert Hodge, found at Macleay River, New South Wales

Eliza Fraser spent two months recovering at Moreton Bay before sailing to Sydney, public receptions, the popular media and worldwide notoriety. Rumours, exaggerations, perhaps madness....

ELIZA: ... but that my friends is another tale again.

THE END

(Thank you to Mary Eggleston for her input and feedback throughout the development of this script and taking on the role of Eliza in performance. Enquiries regarding performance of this script should be directed to Susan Davis s.davis@cqu.edu.au)

Research statement

Research background

This work explores relationships to place through the experiences of one of the most notorious women in Australian history. Surviving a shipwreck in 1836 Eliza Fraser lived with Aboriginal people around the Fraser and Sunshine Coast regions before being rescued several months later. Her notoriety began after Fraser returned to England. Her accounts of cannibalism contributed to colonial perspectives of Indigenous Australians as being ‘primitive’, a perspective that underpinned subsequent frontier violence. To explore this narrative documentary research was shaped into a fictional imagining of what may have occurred, told in Eliza’s voice. The focus on Eliza’s perspective does not ignore or disregard that of others, especially those of Aboriginal people then and now. There is a whole other story, and further creative work to be done to explore the story from these different perspectives.

Research contribution

The genre of creative nonfiction has emerged as a significant force in the literary realm allowing writers to transform factually based information into various literary texts using the stylistic devices of those forms (Brien, 2000a, 2000b; Forche & Gerard, 2001; Gutkind, 2008). It has been most often realised in prose forms such as memoir and biography. This work extends its application through the creation of a dramatic script, bringing the voice of the key protagonist alive through a scripted theatrical form. The Eliza Fraser story has been explored by many famous, mostly male, Australian artists including Sidney Nolan (painting), Patrick White (novel), David Williamson and Tim Burstall (film) as well as Peter Sculthorpe (music with text by Barbara Blackman). This script makes a contemporary female contribution to this oeuvre of work.

Research significance

This script was developed as part of the NeoGeography 3C Regional Writing project supported by Arts Queensland, the Australia Council for the Arts and Sunshine Coast Council. This project (Queensland Writers Centre, 2010) asked artists to document and reflect on their relationship to place. The script was developed following research and blogging in the role of Eliza Fraser across a four-month period. *Figments of Eliza* was staged successfully for the NeoGeography showcase but can also be read as a piece of writing in its own right.

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