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TREADING LIGHTLY: AN ECOLOGY OF HEALING

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**A Thesis Submitted in Total Fulfilment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

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University of Adelaide
November 1996**

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SUMMARY OF THESIS



This research explores the constructions that people in a particular Victorian community held in respect of healing from the experiences of the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfire. It is hoped that insights from these constructions will inform nursing in its mandate to healing work.

The theoretical framework is one of continual processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Constructionism is argued as ontologically relativistic and epistemologically subjective and interactive. Methodologically, it is hermeneutic in so far as methods aim at eliciting deep meanings, and dialectic in so far as individual constructions are juxtaposed critically in order to create more informed reconstructions. Forty people were interviewed. Of these, twenty-six were residents, two of whom had a relative killed, eleven of whom lost their home and/or businesses and personal possessions, and a further thirteen did not experience physical loss but were deeply affected by the devastation to their community. The remaining fourteen people in the study were disaster relief workers: local doctors and community health nurses and various professionals who came to assist people in their recovery process.

Embedded in the fire narratives were themes about stress and coping, about role expectations, about loss, emotion and conflict. By far the most dominant however, was the theme of attachment to space and place and a non-instrumental love of nature which has, in this work, been identified as a cosmology. The thesis explores this notion of cosmology historically from ancient myth to postmodern science, finally constructing an 'ecological postmodern cosmology' incorporating Whiteheadian organicism, Bohm's implicate order, ecological environmentalism and contemporary thought about spirituality. Nursing's philosophy is then reconstructed through this ecological postmodern lens, and ideas about how this might inform contexts and practices of care and healing are proposed. Nurses work in disrupted lifespaces, and who they are and what they bring to their work is informed by their belief system. Those who practice from a cosmological belief in the connectedness of all things identify themselves as in and of the environment of another and will search for ways to reach out to that other, creating holding, sustaining and balancing environments of care and compassion.