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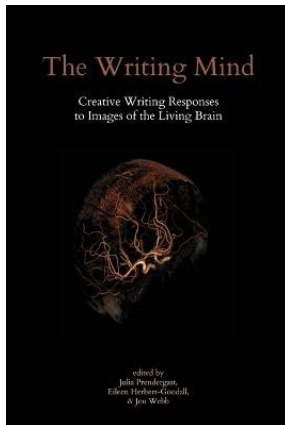
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TEXT review

Lingering wonder

Review by Dominique Hecq



Julia Prendergast, Eileen Herbert-Goodall & Jen Webb (eds).

The Writing Mind: Creative Writing Responses to Images of the Living Brain

Recent Work Press, Watson, ACT, AU 2023

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Pb 244pp 35.95 AUD

We live in an age captivated by, and captive to, science and technology. Since the time of Vitruvius and Leonardo in the European Renaissance, science and technology serve as a source of imagery and metaphor for art, and directly influence the shaping of artefacts. It's impossible for me not to mention Michel Serres, who has traced themes across disciplines such as literature, philosophy, science and art, combining, for example William Turner's turbulent paintings, Jules Michelet's broad historical canvasses, Emile Zola's naturalistic portraits and Sadi Carnot's thermodynamics. And, before Serres, Gaston Bachelard, a scientist, made contributions in the fields of poetics and the philosophy of science, venturing into explorations of the creative mind.

Today, science and technology—instead of announcing speed, progress and well-being—open the way to the devastation of the environment, depletion of resources, transmutation of human genetics and mass destruction. Nonetheless, it still offers art and creative writing a fertile source of images, analogies, metaphors likely to spawn wonder and a plethora of word (re)presentations. *The Writing Mind: Creative Writing Responses to Images of the Living Brain* is testimony to this.

The Writing Mind comprises 60 creatively-enhanced colour images of the living brain (Paris Lyons). Each image is heightened by two inspired writing responses in poetry, prose poetry, fiction, sudden fiction, micro essay, nonfiction and life writing vignettes written as ekphrastic replies to the images.

This book was conceived through a partnership between the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) and the Science Art Network (ScAN), housed at the neuroimaging department at Swinburne University of Technology. The broader context for the project is a Creative Writing Neuroimaging Research Study currently underway at Swinburne, which analyses the activity in participants' brains while undertaking a creative writing assignment. The editors gathered a broad selection of established and emerging Australian writers, but also solicited work from overseas authors, some of them also musicians, artist or scientists. The original collaborative and cross-disciplinary project saw participants receive one of many neuroimaging colour pictures.

Results have been live on a [website](#) for some time but, in creating the book, a wonderful thing happened: instead of pieces grouped by author, theme or genre, each image appears and a number of texts follow. The collection launches all works to another platform with eerie synchronicity. Here, indeed, voices converge in the dreamwork of shared composition.

My initial reading of the book was unencumbered by a thematic frame and I appreciated each piece for its spread of ideas, images, styles, tonalities and refracting nuances, but I couldn't help but trying to identify points of contact, recurring topics or, indeed, an overarching theme upon second reading.

Irrespective of ethnic, geographical or professional background, all pieces share a vision of humaneness and devotion to the transformative power of art. Together, they construct a conversation across the arts and sciences with meta-musical, meta-poetic and meta-fictional resonances. One recurring preoccupation is the discrepancy between mind and brain, with the brain looked at as a simple organ of the human body or as a beautiful marriage of organ and mind in a complex embodied entity inseparable from memory, affect, feeling and language. But, as a participant in the project, I may be biased. So, please, forgive me. One thing I'll say is that, as a participant, I revelled in the diversity of approaches, aesthetics, genres, styles and "outcomes." The instruction was to write about an image as quickly as possible with no length constraint. I understood this to be the rule of free association. Of course, this experiment shows there is no such thing. There are some meditations, oneiric fragments, flash fiction, neo surrealist prose poems, dialectical dialogues and both prose and poetry, focusing on surfaces

or responding to shape, colour, detail... ‘Outcomes’ higher up on this paragraph is an unusual choice of word—I was struck by how polished some texts emerged.

Among these accomplished (read “polished”) pieces are Luke Johnson’s “Disney to acquire the Bible Ltd” (pp. 27-28), Willo Drummond’s “Body mapping inside the arachnoid disco” (p. 55), Patrick Allington’s “Untitled” (p. 82), Ravi Shankar’s “The Weight of Thought” (pp. 111-12), followed by Deedle Rodriguez-Tomlinson’s arresting stream of consciousness “Blue”, Roanna Gonsalves’s hilarious satirical fiction “Conclusion of phase 4 study meeting all primary efficacy endpoints demonstrating that purple vaccine B)LT1984 is 95% effective against ‘Belief that the universe is made of stories’ (BUMOS)” (pp. 153-54) and Frank T Simes’ “Meta-Musical Field” (pp. 189-90).

Somewhere in between are liminal texts (no less “accomplished”!) such as Nigel Krauth’s conversational micro essay “Who is this strange being?” (pp. 41-42), Michael Salcman’s “The fire inside your head” (p. 113) and Lynda Hawryluk’s “Blacking out” (p. 201). I call these liminal because they are non-immersive ekphrastic pieces, acutely aware as they are about contingency. Indeed, as are Katrina Finlayson’s moving “Fireworks” and Dominic Symes’ spirited “Clueless” which brilliantly deconstructs the notion of “self” in a Barthesian gesture with Mick Jagger in cameo (p. 223).

Now, that is strange: as if to anticipate or emulate “Clueless”, there are nine pieces titled “Untitled”. Wonder reversal... meaning surprise this time. Jessie Seymour provokes the reader with these opening lines:

The brain is basically sentient jelly.
I’ll leave you for a moment to think about it. (p. 185)

On the other hand, Shane Strange asserts: “A falling. A folding. We are / reduced.” Only to ask: “What is it / to understand?” (p. 14).

Any attempt at articulating an answer would be, as always, a fantasy. What this wonder-full book shows, performs and embodies is that the creative process rests on inter-reaching reciprocities and possibilities. The book amplifies its own architecture so that what might have been a simple observation (what might have risked remaining on the surface of an ekphrastic response) acquires layers of narrative and contemplation that convey a more profound, a highly expectant experience of interconnectedness:

I know what this sounds like, but imagine having your photo taken with the most advanced technology, only you can’t say cheese, not blink, pout, ask for another one on your good side, or decide if you want to delete it or not because it doesn’t look enough like you—it’s you for all to see. (Symes, p. 223)

I want to end with Symes's words. But my alter ego whispers *this would be a surrender of responsibility*. I wonder... Does "eye witness" authority actually derives less from mimesis than from the strength of the existing authority it challenges?

Ekphrasis remains a genre inherently fraught with tension as it pushes the limits of its field of practice. We're dealing with meta-representations in which the verbal contains glosses, frames, or fixes the visual or plastic (sometimes aural) in a language of interpretation and displacement. It need not be so. As Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington remind us, the contemporary practice of ekphrasis is more constricted than it was in ancient Greece (Atherton & Hetherington, 2017). The term ekphrasis: from the Greek *ek* / *out* and *phrasis* / *speak* generates the verb *ekphrazein* which means to call an inanimate object by name. The Writing Mind recovers the original meaning of ekphrasis—that is, it recovers it and covers it through immersion in the living brain.

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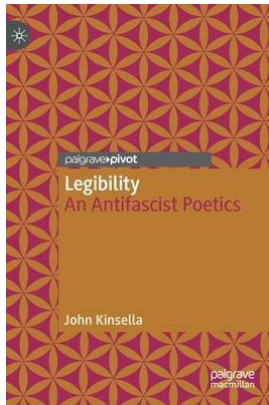
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TEXT review

“Road Closed”: Reading as Resistance in Antifa Poetics

Review by Verity Oswin



John Kinsella

Legibility: An Antifascist Poetics

Palgrave Macmillan, Canterbury, UK, 2022

ISBN 9783030857417

Pb 215pp EUR64.99

In the recent NSW floods our local council ran out of “Road Closed” signs. On side roads farmers painted their own on sheets of tin. Only the main highway to town was interpolated with an official yellow sign in the middle of the bitumen. When the waters subsided, no-one took the sign down. On swerving around the barricade every morning I was acutely conscious of breaking a code. I was surprised at how much power the words exerted – in ignoring the sign I transgressed the norms of its legibility. In John Kinsella’s new book *Legibility: An Antifascist Poetics*, published in the Palgrave series “Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics”, Kinsella employs the term “legibility” to refer to more than just the “readability” of a text. Whether a text is “legible” he argues is contingent upon the reader being versed in the customs, conventions and codes inherent to its creation. His interest is pragmatic – understanding the structures and systems intrinsic to the creation of “signs and inscriptions” of ruling discourses “is pivotal to the ability to resist them” (p. 15).

In a hybrid format he labels a “book-essay”, Kinsella places a macro lens on a diverse range of “object(s) of writing” (p. 29). Pointing out that the cognitive act of reading and “understanding” the specific codes of legibility associated with any text is as politically fraught as the act of putting pen to paper, he sets out to challenge and interrogate those very codes through engaging in a series of experimental literary acts. He labels these “acts of retrieval and rewriting” (p. 202) and they are designed to elucidate how reading texts against the grain has the capacity to disrupt existing power structures and hierarchies.

Emerging out of a broader conviction that “control over the nature of knowledge and creativity” is an important element of fascism, the breadth of Kinsella’s own activism (described under the umbrella term “antifa”), is reflected in the topics the chapters embrace (p. 205). With characteristic flare the poet and critic barrels through such wide-ranging themes as the pandemic, human rights, injustice, disarmament, animal rights, genetics, Palestine and Israel, the role of poetry, “graphology” and the significance (or not) of his own handwriting. He road tests different “destabilizing” readings of Dickinson, Mallarme, Dante, and Rimbaud and deconstructs his own journal. The result is a “spring-loaded” manual of antifa poetics in which all chapters work towards advancing the author’s central claim that in settler Australia, the very act of “reading” a text is to be implicated in fascist and colonial orthodoxies (p. 4).

Placing the essays in dialogue with examples of his own poetry allows Kinsella to show and tell at the same time. The book is both an articulation and demonstration of a range of ways in which legibility/illegibility norms can be redoubled in order to disrupt and deactivate the homogenizing tropes that inform them. The overall aim is to motivate the writing and reading of poetry as “an antifa act of resistance” (p. 206). His broader standpoint is clear – literature should earn its keep. Both writers and readers have a duty to perform important cultural and political work.

As Australia’s signature post-pastoral poet, Kinsella’s own oeuvre is based on an ongoing critique of the poetics of empire. This book can be seen as a natural expansion of “radical pastoral” or the strategy by which contemporary writers redeploy the pastoral mode in a way which elucidates and explores the complicities inherent in its production. In the poem “In a Wheatfield: An Eclogue” Kinsella reframes the idyll of the wheatfield as a setting for war crimes at the hands of Australian soldiers in Afghanistan (p. 161). The fact Kinsella lives in the same wheatbelt heartland his work critiques is central to his voice. In the poem we learn that he “went to school” with “blokes like” the soldiers (p. 162). His inside knowledge as a settler lends authority to his position, yet also implicates him in their transgressions. The field in the poem is tilled by “death’s farmers”. The notion of the “harvest” is parodied – here it will be of bodies. Whether it be the field or the page, for Kinsella “the poem is a decentred site of protest” (p. 4): “[p]oems have consequences, and as poets and readers we are constantly engaging and disengaging with them” (p. 164).

For Kinsella coloniality is not just the preamble to all settler writing, but also the discourse by which it is made intelligible. Viewed through his lens of “legibility”, grammar itself can be

seen as an inherently political structure. The act of proof-reading is a form of policing this structure; checking to see if the writing conforms with a specific set of conventions peculiar to modern English prose. The norms of legibility are hidden in plain sight making the cultural work they perform even more invidious. Pointing out that another writer or speaker is less adept in these codes and conventions is a form of violence, predicated on reinscribing these colonial hierarchies of knowledge or “legibilities”. In settler Australia, to whom is a text legible? What types of readers may find the same text “illegible”? In whose interests is its “meaning” conveyed? At whose expense?

Kinsella’s essays explore how in the very act of consuming texts, we become complicit in these same homogenizing tropes of “legibility”. To read glibly or just for pleasure is a form of “acquiescence” (p. 45), comparable for Kinsella (not one to miss the chance of a provocation) to the mindless consumption of luxury goods. Texts are like any other capitalist product – the material conditions and power differentials surrounding their creation inform their consumption. In some ways his legibility argument can be distilled into a straightforward warning against reading expediently.

If we agree that readability and legibility can have shifting and often different political and ethical emphases, with temporal and spatial context being key along with availability of interpreters, say, of a different ‘era’, then we ask if we want to ‘take’ from a text all that was intended in its writing, or if we’re looking for an impression that will serve some purpose in the here and now. (p. 32)

The book overall, however, is far from straightforward. He does, by his own admission, “favour the emphatic” (p. 45) and the text really takes the form of a manifesto. With his poet’s ear for rhythm and oratory, there is a virtuosity to the language, but ideas are often presented as affirmations rather than arguments. The poems afford welcome breathing space in the otherwise dense prose, and if at times the jump cuts between complex ideas can feel a bit like watching antifa MTV, the originality of the thinking is good recompense.

In Chapter 2 “Handwriting Protest” the author explores how handwritten text can constitute a form of resistance: “The politics of handwriting is active not dead” (p. 19). Contrasting mainstream texts with reproductions of his own journals, Kinsella argues that the printed word is not innocent of intent. Typeface imposes constraints upon the reader whilst also presupposing prior knowledge. “The printing press was liberty but also oppression. It was the basis for sharing radical ideas and then overwriting them” (p. 9). Digitalized text is also given special attention – the “keys of the web” are “dark” and offer the reader “false illumination” (p. 19). Kinsella’s handwriting is, by his own admission, “almost illegible”, but we are told that both his partner and mother can read it (p. 11). Kinship and affective ties can be preconditions to the “legibility” of a text. The relationship between farmer and neighbour may afford a hand painted road sign more authority than one erected by the council. The meaning of a text may ostensibly be clear, but clear to whom? The whole book is really a deconstruction of the notion of clarity itself. “Legible” texts should be cross-examined for motive. “Legibility can be a deception, a claim of authority through clarity” (p. 5).

In “Markings”, one of the book’s most engaging chapters, in a strategy resonant of poet Tracy K Smith’s use of archive, Kinsella quite literally writes in and “over” his grandfather’s old forestry records. As a type of poet-vandal, Kinsella demonstrates that texts can be read in ways that disrupt and expose existing hierarchies rather than perpetuating them. Here the old ledgers are both defaced and embellished by the poet’s hand. The “authenticity” of the historical record is compromised, yet at the same time an obscure archive is given a new visibility and readership. Kinsella engages in an act of “altering the legibility of records until the indelible is unreadable and says something else” (p. 18). The poet-vandal is seen “erasing the records of colonial erasure” but at the same time creating new meanings through writing into and restoring negative space (p. 18).

Kinsella is the first to point out, however, that even these most radical interventions cannot exist outside the poetics of empire in which his own sensibility has been forged. The forestry charts still display his grandfather’s name. The name “Kinsella” is marked on the record of erasure. The indelibility of settler history is central to his writing practice. Whether one writes into the void, an empty map or occupied territory, how can one ensure that one does not in turn “possess or dispossess the space” oneself (p. 45)?

In this chapter’s accompanying poem, “Forest as Space”, Kinsella parodies the “song” of pastoral; in which “space is seen as emptiness, to fill with production” (p. 120). The poem explores the board game *Squatter*; a quirky antipodean version of *Monopoly* in which one literally “plays for sheep stations” rather than London real estate. Settler Australia’s libidinal investment in the mythopoetics of “‘tucker bags’, ‘sheep tokens’ and ‘improved pasture’” is invoked (p. 120). Australia has been divided up into “lifestyle blocks” but land has always been at the centre of the nation’s economy of desire (p. 191). Contemporary Australia is an agricultural and extractive capitalism founded literally and symbolically on a stolen homeland. He subverts the colonial imperatives of the forestry ledgers by writing over them, yet even this act is still a nod to their authority. He wonders about the provenance of the paper the ledgers are written on. Is it from old growth forests? The extent to which the settler writer, even the writer engaged in resistance, is always already complicit in and constrained by the colonial enterprise is at the heart of Kinsella’s work.

One of the most compelling aspects of the essays is indeed their unapologetic subjectivity. Kinsella is a “super-subject” and his unashamedly political stance is refreshing beside the sometimes anodyne, disembodied voice of traditional academic narrators. Indeed, the essays most grounded in Kinsella’s lived experience provide a firmer scaffolding from which to wage his dialectics. The body “reads” all it comes into contact with and a lifetime of antifa activism has made Kinsella’s own corporeal journey more interesting than that of most. His accounts of his own struggle with addiction, periods of marginalization and time in gaol add depth and nuance to otherwise abstract arguments on violence and pacificism.

A crisis and its resolution are strange bedfellows but throughout the book Kinsella makes a compelling case for language being both the site of oppression and for resisting that oppression.

The “de-hierarchizing of language seems essential to the act of creating a peaceful antifascist resistance” (p. 200). Poetry and other forms of disruptive writing are the only salve to the wound. “A poem is a rupture in time and space and *will* have consequences” (p. 164). As such, he asks the settler reader to ask what her own reading is “in the service” of? The stakes are high. The reader is playing for much more than sheep stations. How can we ensure we do not further racist and fascist tropes even in the act of reading? Reading and writing are dangerous businesses. Kinsella doesn’t put too fine a point on it: “[i]f we are in a pit with the devil, it’s time to get out of it and rethink the dynamic, and its oppressions” (p. 202). Kinsella’s paternal grandfather was a signwriter and the power of the sign and the word is reified here: “Inscriptions, graffiti, slogans, daubs – symbols carrying threat or resisting threat. The mode is not the content – but is the mode indicative of patterns of reading: desired patterns, and possible responses” (p. 28).

Kinsella’s book exhorts us to read the back of billboards, drive past “road closed” signs, tamper with ledgers. These are all texts in Australia’s poetics of empire, a poetics in which all settler writing, has its lineage. Kinsella’s book demonstrates that as readers we are equally up to our neck in it. “Legibility” presupposes and indeed demands that the reader be complicit in the systems, conventions and power inequities that have given rise to the text’s creation and indeed those which surround its consumption. The book advocates for a textuality that is at least cognizant of these “complicities” (p. 202). The choice of the ledger as a sustained focus is apposite. It allows Kinsella to underline important questions for his antifa project. At the end of the two-hundred-year long columns of our coloniality, what is the bottom line? What are the “consequences” of our reading? What emerges from the reckoning?

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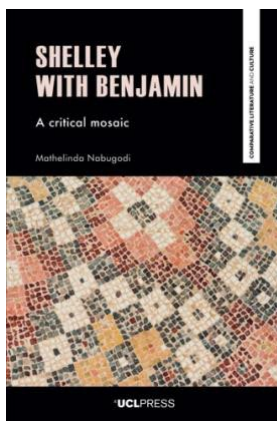
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TEXT review

Mosaic writing: Mathelinda Nabugodi's creative-critical reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin

Review by Amelia Walker



Mathelinda Nabugodi
Shelley with Benjamin: A critical mosaic
UCL Press, London UK 2023
ISBN 9781800083240
Pb 174pp GBP25.00

I am staring at a sea of broken pieces: tiny shards of crockery that were once plates, bowls, mugs, and vases – all of different colours, shapes, and patterns, formed by different hands across gaping eras. Their remnants hint at shifting fashions come and passed, reflecting diverse occasions, purposes, moods, moments – lives. Now they're all mixed up. I can't tell what's what. Even if I could, the pieces are so tiny, some as fine as sand. There's no way I could puzzle even a single one back to wholeness. So I sit and ponder this new riddle of their coming-together. What might I make of this glittering mess? The problem isn't a lack of possibilities, rather an overabundance. There are so many pictures these pieces could form, all different. Which should I choose?

That's how I feel as I wonder how to review of Mathelinda Nabugodi's *Shelley with Benjamin: A critical mosaic* – a book that illuminates so much across so many levels, about which there's volumes I long to say. I could pen at least five reviews: one on the innovative creative-critical strategies Nabugodi deploys; one on the new insights it offers into its focal authors, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin; one on how expertly this book confronts the changing challenges of political writing; one on Nabugodi's generous approach to problematic elements in the writings and lives of her two focal figures; and one on the artful manner in which Nabugodi balances academic demands of critical rigor with acknowledgement of personal situatedness. Stretching further still, there could be an entire review on each of the individual themes that braid throughout the book – death, naming, haunting, translation, aesthetics, authenticity, the im/possibility of meaning through language, rhythms, violence, and atonement, to name but a few. However, trying to write any single one of these reviews in isolation would be like trying to pick the fragments of a single saucer from the mixed up pile of broken crockery: inevitably, the re-assemblage would both fall short of and exceed its intentions. Some pieces of other objects would sneak in while key components would remain missing, undiscoverable, mistaken for something else. All these fragments are already inextricably connected; they must all remain in the picture somehow.

Thankfully, an answer to the challenges of reviewing *Shelley with Benjamin* resides in the book itself. From the start, Nabugodi emphasises the multiple ways in which poetry, criticism, and language are always-already split, broken, incomplete, self-contradictory, and in excess of their own articulations. The preface opens by noting that the word criticism is itself “rooted in the Ancient Greek κρίνω – ‘to separate, to divide, to split’”, meaning that “one who criticises divvies up the matter, separates the wheat from the chaff, divides a problem into its constituent elements” and through this process “also weeds out personal whims and bugbears from their analysis” (p. xi). As Nabugodi relays, these demands entail personal and political challenges:

When I arrived at university to study English Literature and Philosophy, I did not realise the extent to which the education I was about to receive would separate my intellectual life from my personal development as a young woman of Afro-European heritage. This contrast – between my critical and my private selves – determines the contour of my split. (p. xi)

Nabugodi then proceeds to observe how both Shelley and Benjamin were also split – in Shelley's case, as a “British Romantic poet, born in 1792 to a baronetcy” who, despite being expelled from university for his atheism and refusal to answer questions was “nonetheless destined to become one of the most canonical poets in the English language”, and in Benjamin's case as “a German Jewish philosopher” born in 1892 to “a solidly bourgeois family in Berlin” who was also “expelled from the academy after his habilitation thesis was deemed incomprehensible” yet posthumously became “one of the most influential critical theorists of the twentieth century” (p. xi). Observing that “posterity has received Shelley as a poet and Benjamin as a theorist”, Nabugodi flags an aim of showing “how their own works invalidate such descriptions.

Nabugodi then raises one of the book's central concepts: the mosaic. Noting Benjamin's approach to criticism as "a mosaic of citations" alongside Shelley's suggestion that "criticism is 'to poetry what mosaic is to painting'", Nabugodi explains how the two inspired the book's methodology, which "combines Benjamin's and Shelley's considerations to simultaneously demarcate and suspend the split between poetry and philosophy, creation and contemplation" (p. xii). Later, Nabugodi adds that the book's way of bringing Shelley and Benjamin into dialogue is also inspired by Walter Benjamin's doctoral dissertation on Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg), wherein "rather than pursuing the Romantic concept of criticism through a comparative reading of Schlegel and Novalis" Benjamin instead "approaches their writings as one oeuvre, alternately citing from either author to substantiate his argument" (pp. 5-6).

Shelley with Benjamin comprises three main sections, each of which in turn contains three chapters. In this way, the book has the formal feel of a mosaic in which larger pieces are visibly broken down into smaller ones, emphasising parts that form more than a whole. The individual chapters are each "anchored in an image or concept that appears in both Shelley's and Benjamin's works, and that therefore acts as the connecting link between them" (p. xiii). This approach enables Nabugodi to "establish relations between them without appealing to notions of influence, reception or even commensurability between the two" (p. xiii). In the first section, 'Truth in a Name', the images and titles include 'Shells', 'Violets', and 'Footsteps'. These chapters deal with language, the first focusing primarily on acts of naming, the second on challenges of translation (both between languages and within the same language via translating acts involved in any attempt at communication or interpretation), and the third on slippages of meaning, particularly their consequences for the im/possibilities of criticism. However, rather than sitting neatly put within their main designated chapters, these three chapter themes all permeate each other's boundaries, weaving in with multiform additional themes that punctuate the book (which as earlier noted include death, aesthetics, guilt, and atonement, among others).

Shelley with Benjamin's structure reflects Nabugodi's likening of mosaic writing to a constellation that "connects the disparate and the similar" and thus "balances without resolving tensions", forming "a relation not simply between its constituent stars but also between those stars and the beholder" (p. xv). Nabugodi emphasises that the relation at play in *Shelley with Benjamin* are far from static, emerging "out of the flux of literary and intellectual history" and "movement in time" (p. xiii). For Nabugodi, the relation between herself and the British academic system produces paradoxes, for in this historically white and male-dominated context "the ideal critic" is one who "writes a level-headed prose, values arguments over opinions, facts over feelings, and is moved by no passion other than the pursuit of knowledge... not hampered by anxiety, racked by menstrual pains or worried about how to pay the rent" (p. xv).

Further paradoxes emerge through Nabugodi's focus on "Romanticism and its afterlife in twentieth-century literary theory", for Romanticism represents "a movement in many ways preoccupied with questions of subjectivity" – that is, with "the dull vapours of the little world of self" (Shelley in Nabugodi, 2023, p. xv) that mainstream academia has historically

encouraged – and often still encourages – critics to suppress. Noting Shelley’s depiction of self as ““that burr that will stick to one”” (in Nabugodi, 2023, p. xv), Nabugodi explains how “[r]ather than trying to get ‘that burr’ off me, in this book I make my subjective self visible as part of my critical interpretation”, arguing that while “‘objectivity’, ‘discipline’ and ‘intellectual rigour’ give literary criticism a scientific veneer, distinguishing it from dilettantish appreciation”, they have simultaneously “served to negate other ways of knowing literary texts, including the forms of knowledge gained from historically situated, embodied experience” (p. xv).

In the first three-chapter section, emphasis on situated subjectivity takes up bell hooks’s invitation to “occupy the margin as a site of resistance” (p. xvi). In the course of discussing Shelley and Benjamin’s differing yet articulable approaches to language, naming, and translation, Nabugodi places anecdotes about her own name into the margins of the text. This she humbly figures as “my attempt to salvage the imperfections of my reading”, posing that “[t]hese facts from my personal history frame my interpretation even though they obviously are of no relevance for the texts under discussion” (p. xvi). Yet for me Nabugodi’s naming anecdotes provided a vital sense of context and connection through which I could better grasp all of the ideas and complexities at play. For higher degree research candidates and creative writing academics generally wondering how to navigate the challenges of exegetical writing or framing creative work to meet the standards of the academy, Nabugodi provides a brilliant model of an effective strategy for producing writing that is at once critical and creative, personal and scholarly, and attuned to the problematics governing the situated time and place from which one articulates, yet speaking towards diverse beyonds.

The second section, ‘Loving Knowledge’, turns towards aesthetics, including sustained attention to the differing ways in which Shelley’s and Benjamin’s writings manifest influences of Ancient Greek philosophers. I must admit, the opening of the section’s first chapter, ‘Beauty’, with lengthy discussion of purported links between truth and beauty had me feeling uneasy at first through. But as I continued reading, it became clear to me that Nabugodi does not herself advocate a simplistic adoption of such views. Instead, Nabugodi troubles the truth-beauty connection’s influence, raising complex questions about the cultural and political implications of aesthetic judgements and definitions of authenticity. The second chapter of the section, ‘Mosaics’, interrogates these problematics deeply, and I grinned with delight when I reached the third, ‘Love’, which opens with the line “Socrates is ugly” (p. 79). As ‘Love’ continues, Nabugodi proceeds to unpack some of the intellectual uglinesses – or at least, problematic elements – in the writings and lives of Shelley and Benjamin, including gender essentialism and homophobia. Nabugodi’s critique is illuminative and sharp, yet never harsh or judgemental, managing to retain an ultimate sense of respect for her focal authors and understanding of how their attitudes were shaped by cultural norms of their times. Nabugodi resists letting their problematic stances on certain issues overshadow the other good and useful ideas their texts provides. Nabugodi thus demonstrates a finely balanced approach to generous criticism, or what Timothy Bewes (2010) calls reading *with* and *against* the grain of texts to push *beyond* cultural, discursive, and conceptual constraints of both the writer’s socio-historic positioning and one’s own.

The generous critical approach carries into the third and final section: ‘Legacies of Violence’. Here, via chapters on ‘Guilt’, ‘Attonement’ and ‘Forgiveness’, Nabugodi confronts the unsettling fact that both Shelley and Benjamin, despite their humanitarian displays on other fronts, failed to speak up against slavery and other modes of racism against African people. As Nabugodi notes, Shelley made some gestures towards decrying slavery via his reputed revusal to take slave-manufactured sugar in his tea, but “never directly addressed the situation of enslaved Africans in his writing” (p. 98). Furthermore, on the one instance when Shelley *did* mention slavery, it was not to call for its end, but rather to make “retrospective celebration” of what Shelley presented as slavery’s abolition (p. 113). However, this celebration was gravely misleading, for as Nabugodi points out, “[w]hile the British Parliament outlawed the slave trade in 1807, slavery itself remained legal until 1833” – a fact of which Shelley can’t have been ignorant, for he “witnessed the will of his fellow-author and Caribbean plantation owner Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis, in which Lewis freed his slaves – but only on his death”, leaving “no doubt that Shelley was aware of the existence of chattel slavery” (p. 133). Nonetheless, Shelley,

completely disregarded it [slavery] in his construction of literary history, according to which poetry had produced the abolition of slavery by the time of the Provençal troubadours. In this gesture, he effectively writes Black people in the British Empire out of history. (pp. 133-134)

Meanwhile, Benjamin was himself subject to racial persecution as a Jewish person living in Nazi-occupied Germany. Yet “anti-Black racism does not appear to have interested Benjamin either” and Benjamin voiced no resistance towards racist and pro-segregationists attitudes on the parts of close friend within his literary coterie (p. 97).

Nabugodi again takes a non-judgemental approach, reading the shortcomings of her focal authors in the context of their socio-historic circumstances, and emphasising the value that can be found in other aspects of their writing nonetheless. Again, Nabugodi balances creative, critical, scholarly, and subjective tendencies via inserting herself into the text, this time with frequent reference to and inspiration from M. NourbeSe Philip’s verse novel *Zong!* (2008) – “one of our time’s most haunting confrontations with the legacies of transatlantic slavery” (Nabugodi, 2023, p. xviii). As Nabugodi relays, *Zong!* tells the true historic story of “a court case concerning the slave ship *Zong*, whose captain decided to throw 150 Africans overboard to claim compensation for lost ‘cargo’” (p. xviii). *Zong!* thus confronts unspeakable brutalities and “the problem of giving voice to, without speaking for, victims of historical violence” (Nabugodi, 2023, p. xviii). NourbeSe Philip’s negotiation of these challenges is

partially encoded in the formatting: the poem has a symphonic structure and its final movement is printed in fading shades of grey – the text appears to sink into the page so as to visually reinforce ‘the un-telling of what cannot, yet must, be told’. (Nabugodi, 2023, p. xviii)

Nabugodi acknowledges *Zong!* as the inspiration for her formal strategy of presenting “the interlinear interruptions” in part three of *Shelley with Benjamin* in grey italics:

This keeps them [the interlinear interruptions] distinct from the main text even as it testifies to the near-invisibility of the anti-Black violence on which European culture is built. But while they represent an attempt to bear witness to this history, I do not want to suggest that the interlinear interruptions even come close to adequately acknowledging the horrors of transatlantic slavery. On the contrary, I believe that this is an atrocity whose enormity resists the kind of atonement through literary means that may be associated with the genres of tragedy or elegiac poetry. (p. xviii)

In *Shelley with Benjamin*, the faded appearance of the interruptions in part three both evokes attempted erasure and resists it, for the words remain clearly present despite everything. As in the first section, Nabugodi's adaptation of NourbeSe Philip's poetic strategies for an academic writing context offers a strong model for higher degree by research candidates and creative writing academics seeking creative-critical approaches to scholarship – particularly for those writing on issues of social injustice of which they bear lived experience or a personal connection.

Following the three main sections is a 'Coda', wherein Nabugodi ends on one final image – that of the veil. Citing Benjamin's essay regarding different treatments of "the urban masses" in the writings of Shelley and Baudelaire, Nabugodi relays that "[f]or the flaneur [Baudelaire], there is a veil over this picture. The veil is formed by the masses" (Benjamin in Nabugodi, 2023, p. 144). In contrast, by Benjamin's account, Shelley's poetry "fixes its gaze on the masses, and in this gesture lifts the veil on 'the horrible social reality' of the city he describes even as it simultaneously casts the veil of its own measured language over that same reality" (p. 144). This reminds me that any mosaic, however, intricate, always contains more than a viewer notices at first glance, or even after staring for quite some time. Although I have attempted, in this review, to bring together all the glittering pieces of insight *Shelley and Benjamin* offered me in my reading, my portrayal remains partial and fragmented after all.

However, if I can manage to portray one impression of *Shelley and Benjamin*, I hope it might be of the strength, value, and uniqueness of this remarkable book. It is one I know I shall return to again and again, for there are multiple ways it can inform my work as both a poet and an academic – particularly regarding the possibilities and limits of political writing (creative *and* critical) to confront thorny issues of our times. I recommend it most highly to all those involved in the same or similar pursuits and interests – and to all who relish thinking about words, language, life, death, love, violence, and the strange constellations sparkling between and beyond it all.

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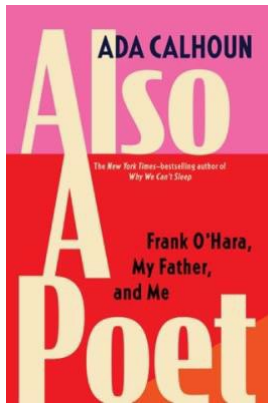
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TEXT review

On Not Writing a Biography (again)

Review by Aidan Coleman



Ada Calhoun

Also a Poet

Grove Press, New York, NY, 2023

ISBN 9780802162137

Pb 272pp USD18.00

Ada Calhoun's hybrid memoir *Also a Poet* begins in a Manhattan basement, with Calhoun, a journalist and nonfiction writer of some fame, sorting through her father's dusty cassette tapes. Calhoun's father, Peter Schjeldahl, was a second-generation New York school poet but in the last four decades, before his recent death, he became a successful art critic, whose writing was shortlisted for a Pulitzer Prize. Father and daughter had shared a love of Frank O'Hara. Schjeldahl, who had been contracted by Harper and Row to write the first authorised biography of O'Hara had been stonewalled by O'Hara's literary executor and sister, Maureen O'Hara Granville-Smith. His daughter thinks she might succeed where her father had failed and so, she reflects, might create something of which her father would be proud, and just might heal the breach between them. But she soon finds that she too is butting heads and getting nowhere with O'Hara's difficult literary executor.

For over half the book, a conventional biography is still a possibility, though we might have the sense that what we are reading is patently not that book. Through these pages, as Calhoun listens to the tapes, we learn much about O'Hara and his milieu but Calhoun and her father emerge as the central characters. Snippets of the interviews, and Calhoun's commentary are interspersed with domestic and public scenes from their lives past and present. There is an easy grace with which Calhoun moves between her childhood (through the 70s and 80s) to Frank O'Hara's New York of the 50s and 60s, and the deftly-problematised present.

A heated conversation with Granville-Smith kills the idea of any biography and the book, which was always a meditation on the genre, gently evolves into a memoir of Calhoun's father and her relationship with him. The narrative refocuses on his diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, and the family's dealing with the death of his mother – of whom he's ironically unforgiving. There is a fire in which the family's apartment, where Calhoun grew up, is gutted, and there are also the ravages of COVID. O'Hara's presence is more ghostly through these pages but he never completely fades from sight.

Interest in the New York painters of Abstract Expressionism and the coeval poets of the New York school has become a mini-industry in recent times. Many who are fascinated by O'Hara will read this book. Despite its brevity, some new details about O'Hara do emerge. I've never read, for example, that O'Hara's family owned a block of land called Tower Hill, in Grafton, where the poet was planning to breed English and Irish setters after the war, before they sold it. There's a more sympathetic angle on O'Hara's mother than Brad Gooch and other biographers provide, and a gently feminist perspective from a Greenwich village insider, sympathetic to the art and writing but not to the politics, the machismo and entitlement.

Darker than this is Calhoun's reflection on the children of Bohemia – Australian readers will be reminded of the recent controversy surrounding Dorothy Hewitt. "Rare is the child of bohemia who wasn't preyed upon by adults in one way or another," Calhoun writes. She recalls her parents' artist friends complimenting her legs, staring at her breasts and of being molested by a babysitter's boyfriend when she was only five. Calhoun reflects that: 'The children of Bohemia were older than our years and the men of Bohemia were younger than theirs.' She challenges the values of the male-dominated art world, in which women are objectified as muses or sex objects, while – in the case of her mother – these same women hold things together, and enable their male partner's careers. This critique comes out in some of the thumbnail sketches of artists, including Larry Rivers, who boasts of chasing teenage girls, and the self-fascinated William de Kooning who beat his mistress.

Such darkness is absent from Calhoun's father. Despite his pre-eminence as an art critic, he is a bumbling and oblivious character. At times his neglect is monumental – he puts his daughter on a New York city bus to go to a party as an 8-year-old with no clear instructions – but mostly it's his disconnection: his forgetfulness of important moments they have shared, gifts received or given, or his complete indifference to his daughter's interests or pursuits including their mutual love of O'Hara. When his daughter's book hits the New York Times Bestseller List. He sends her a one-word congratulatory email: 'Zoom'. She reflects how he has been pampered

and indulged, by being allowed to write and do nothing else. As his cheerfully long-suffering wife puts it, when he is dismissive of his daughter attending a residency: ‘Your life has been a writer’s residency!’

A poet given the alias of Spencer, is a comic presence we never meet, and the son that Calhoun never had. When Calhoun announces that she’s learning Sanskrit, her father swears and slams a cupboard door (one he would ordinarily leave open, she notes); so disgusted is he at the thought that his daughter might end up an academic. When Spencer learns Sanskrit though it is a mark of his brilliance and the commendably wide-ranging scope of his passions. When Schjeldahl gets the news about his cancer his first comment, with wife and daughter present, is that his writing is ‘everything’. His second thought is for Spencer to be his literary executor, creating the potentially absurd situation that Calhoun would have to go to Spencer to quote the tapes that she’s working with or her own father. Despite the ire that often flares from these exchanges, Calhoun’s portrait of her father is tempered by affection. And we see that he is as neglectful of his own person as he is of others, with his diet of donuts and heavy smoking – and in his flaunting of the COVID restrictions to buy beer and cigarettes.

As her father approaches death, Calhoun comes to a grudging acceptance that he will not change. Such material is treated with just the right degree of vulnerability and never tips too far into the self-pity that the author has an obvious right to. Almost unbelievably, we learn from the acknowledgments, that Calhoun shared the manuscript with her father before it was published and he praised its style and veracity saying: ‘I hope I never confuse truth with a back rub’. So in a sense, this expertly paced narrative comes full circle, the book achieving what she’d hoped the biography might.

Calhoun has worked as a ghost-writer – for the recent Britney Spears biography, among other things – but her writing is better than mere journalism. She has an eye for the telling detail and there is a charming understatedness to her writing. The fluidity of the narrative from topic to topic is impressive and the easy candour of the prose highly personable.

Finally – and this is partly why the book will be of interest to readers of *TEXT* – *Also a Poet* is recommended reading for anyone contemplating the colossal task of a literary biography. Calhoun gives a ringside seat and commentary for her father’s mistakes as a biographer. Of course the big mistake he made was alienating Granville-Smith, which he achieved with incredible speed at their first meeting, with the sort of foot in mouth routine readers have grown used to by the close of this book. He told O’Hara’s sister, firstly, that he thought O’Hara’s friend John Ashbery the better poet and critic but that O’Hara was more important as a social figure. Then, he proceeded to ask if she knew when O’Hara’s first sexual experience was. The book is also a sobering initiation into the murky territory of copyright and literary executors through the cumulative disappointments of father and daughter.

We can learn much from Calhoun’s analysis of her father’s interviews. Schjeldahl is too eager to interrupt, to tell his interviewee that he knows something, to take issue and to argue for his hero. Or, perhaps worst of all, to halt them when they are at their most fluently effusive, in

order to nail down dates and places – the petty details that can be returned to later. Would I have read this book before I began my own biographical research? Calhoun tells us that she never takes a comment off the record. When someone wants to make one she responds: ‘I only want things I can quote in my article’. Almost invariably people tell her the same thing. While this last technique is most relevant to journalism, which will be published shortly after an interview, it would seem to have a wider application.

Finally, we learn about the temperament and virtues essential to the biographer themselves, beginning with the curiosity and empathy that Schjeldahl patently lacks. *Also a Poet* is a testament to two failed biographies and you can sense the ennui of both father and daughter – four decades apart – as the complexity of the task threatens to overwhelm them. What is a highly entertaining read in itself, is surely a helpful manual for what to avoid when you’re embarking on a literary biography. You may even change your mind about the whole thing.

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TEXT review

A Reconciled Landscape

Review by Verity Oswin



Adelle Sefton-Rowston

Politics and Poetics – Race Relations and Reconciliation in Australian Literature

Peter Lang, Oxford, UK, 2021

ISBN 9781788744546

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Adelle Sefton-Rowston's book *Politics and Poetics – Race Relations and Reconciliation in Australian Literature* is based upon her doctoral thesis and examines the role of language in bringing about social change. The author, a senior lecturer at Charles Darwin University, builds her argument through close textual readings of what she labels “reconciliatory literature” (p. 9).

Across five chapters Sefton-Rowston analyses the work of First Nation authors between 1990 and 2010. While “resistance writing” of the 60s, 70s and 80s was produced to “critique racism and advocate for equal rights”, in this reading “reconciliatory” literature is distinguishable in its capacity to transform Australia into a more harmonious society (p. 9). Detailed analyses of texts by Larissa Behrendt, Kim Mahood and Alexis Wright among others form the mainstay of the book and are deployed convincingly to demonstrate that reconciliatory literature has a

unique ability to “undo colonial representations of history, place, and bodies that were originally written (or omitted) by the colonisers and write them into a new world order” (p. 189).

Sefton-Rowston focusses on these texts’ supercharged potential to advance reconciliation but her book is of wider relevance in offering Australians a more wholistic definition of reconciliation itself. Rejecting any notion that the nation should aspire to return to some sort of prior “conciliated era” or space, she argues instead that the term be understood to refer to “not so much a cultural ‘oneness’ but rather “a oneness that the individual feels with home and place” (p. 60). The author’s detailed discussion of the concept of “home” in the context of Behrendt’s writing assumes particular importance here as Sefton-Rowston views reconciliation as fundamentally a reconciliation with place rather than between groups. At the same time her work is instructive in the way in which it explores how literature itself can provide a “place” for reconciliation” (p. 187).

Drawing upon Kristeva’s notion of “poetic language” and Paul Carter’s material thinking, Sefton-Rowston’s wider thesis is that language can have the alchemizing effect of creating alternative realities. Writing is seen as being at once generative and reparative—“renaming the past could ultimately invent a future” (p. 19). New forms of knowing, naming and representing can be the foundations of an alternative “transnational reality” (p. 194).

Implicit in her work is a conviction that the poetics of empire have long circumscribed the stories Australia is able to tell about itself. The book is a critique of the ongoing “reverberant production of an imperial culture that included the strategic use of the arts” (p. 45). However, her focus is on the multiple ways writers can, and indeed do, successfully resist hegemonic structures, through the innovative use of “textual archetypes, character constructions, plots, and symbols” (p. 9). Indeed, poetry and fiction are credited with a unique ability to problematize homogenizing narratives of identity and place. Language is shown to be constitutive not merely representative. It can engender, not only new ways of thinking about the world, but also new ways of “being”: “Politics and poetics are closely aligned: auxiliaries in the construction of social reality” (p. 15).

For Sefton-Rowston reconciliatory literature’s most singular characteristic is its insistence on a return to, or recognition of, the body. In Chapter Four, drawing upon the thinking of Sara Ahmed, Sefton-Rowston examines the way “reconciliatory” texts address the question of how bodies (settler and First Nation) inhabit the imperial space (p. 54). The significance of “bodily encounters” between individual subjects to the wider “communal process” of reconciliation is explored primarily in relation to Meme MacDonald’s *Love Like Water* (p. 135). Reconciliation is as personal as it is political. Subjects must “work to reconstruct themselves—the way they think, move, etc. in relation to the Other” (p. 134).

One of the book’s most useful contributions to scholarship is the section in which Sefton-Rowston expands her analysis to address the often overlooked question of how other non-Anglo migrant bodies are to participate in reconciliation:

The Migrant's relationship with the Indigenous Other complicates the process of repairing race relations between 'colonists' and 'first people' – calling for these binaries to be done away with, redefined and the non-Anglo Migrant Australian included in discussions about race relations. (p. 75)

In Australia's "national story" (p. 196), "difference" has been written out, yet as bodies of all types move through the world, their own "readings" can be important counter-narratives to mimetic mainstream discourse: "[W]riting and reading are ultimately an encounter between bodies and texts. Texts allow one to be "touched" by the evocation of a story" (p. 129).

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* is a key focus of Sefton-Rowston's thoughtful and engaging argument—in particular the way in which Wright's writing can be considered "haptic". Sefton-Rowston also uses Wright's novel as an example of reconciliatory literature which deliberately precludes easy digestion by settler Australia (p. 159)—the text insisting on maintaining a degree of "unknowingness" vis-a-vis white readers (p. 171). Sefton-Rowston sees *Carpentaria* as a radical text which subverts the norms of legibility associated with the great Australian novel—the text assuming knowledge of First Nations culture in the same way settler writing assumes knowledge of colonial epistemologies. The example of *Carpentaria* demonstrates that "reconciliatory literature", is not necessarily "conciliatory". It unashamedly tells "other" stories therein creating "other" places for "other" readers. Indeed, Sefton-Rowston argues that "Australian culture may be continually transformed or reconciled by first imagining new textual worlds and bringing these to life through poetic language" (p. 9).

Sefton-Rowston's discussion of Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* in Chapter 2 demonstrates the way in which these new worlds and new forms of representation (map-making, writing, art) are better placed to incorporate affect. Drawing upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea of perceptible phenomena, Sefton-Rowston suggests reconciliatory texts may even teach us broader lessons about the nature of emotion itself: "[i]f an emotion is to reach complete realisation, it must first come to find expression, gesture, and speech" (p. 126).

If emotions are in fact only ever fully "realized" when expressed through texts or performative acts, the role of writers becomes even more vital. Stories make places and can allow us to "reconcile" with the homelands we inhabit even when the history of those places is fraught or marked by violence. The colonial map is in itself a violence—a conceit that has been employed to inhibit and constrain First Nation relationships to country. The cadastral grid is always already an historical artefact—a representation of performative acts of settler incursion and demarcation. Maps are culturally specific texts masquerading as scientific abstractions—the work they perform made more effective through the denial of the context of their production. Sefton-Rowston finds settler maps inadequate in their refusal to register the ways in which paradigms of affect also inscribe place: "[c]onventional maps are rigid in their design and do not allow for the recording of emotional, cultural and spiritual connections with place" (p. 55). The First Nations' texts examined in this book are examples of alternative place-making. Sefton-Rowston contrasts traditional maps to the "word pictures" (p. 53) and dream

cartography of Mahood, who's maps "are not geographically concrete in their design and once drawn can change with the language of the country" (p. 55).

The topography of the Australian landscape has long warped and buckled in the heat haze of the dreams and desires projected upon it. What would the contours of a "reconciled" Australia look like? What would be its landmarks? How would we read its maps? Sefton-Rowston's book is an exhortation for both indigenous and non-indigenous authors "to read/write themselves into country" (p. 56). She mounts a convincing argument for the creation of alternative "haptic" processes in which new "maps" allowing for "emotional, cultural and spiritual connections with place" are produced (p. 55). The potential for texts: cartographic; poetic or narrative to validate and represent other desires, "different" bodies and alternative epistemologies is a tantalizing one and is at the centre of Sefton-Rowston's poetic yet also ultimately utilitarian understanding of reconciliation: "Australia was once 'discovered' and colonized by the use of language and maps but can be (re)discovered using new ways of mapping bodily experiences with place" (p. 62).

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