



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

RMIT, CQU, Independent Scholar

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Suture: Women's Stories Voiced through Memoir and Poetry

Abstract:

This article emerged from a collaborative presentation at the 2023 AAWP conference in Canberra, “We Need to Talk ...”, where we combined poetry and prose in a presentation titled “We need to talk about how poetry offers restitution of women’s historical voices”. Connections were forged between our research areas – Carson’s poetic biography of George Sand, Costi’s Cypriot women embroiderers, and Williams’ US pioneering women. We wove our voices around these different women’s stories, finding commonality and difference, and experimented with stitching together their three distinct poetic voices and research areas. Although this involved three disparate countries (France, Cyprus and USA) and disparate foci (novelist, embroiderers and pioneering women), there were common threads such as social activism. A female diplomat emerged as a fitting voice to carry this experiment; she would be posted to different countries long enough for cultural immersion, and for engagement in particular poetic projects. We named her Aka, after the first letter of our first names, as well as a pseudonym capturing the meaning of “also known as”, referring to how women working at the fringes often use aliases.

Biographical note:

Anne M. Carson is an Australian poet, essayist and visual artist whose poetry has been published internationally, and widely in Australia, receiving numerous awards including longlisting for Fish International Poetry Prize (2023) and shortlisting for the Ada’s (2024). Her fourth poetry book is *The Detective’s Chair: Prose Poems about Fictional Detectives* (Liquid Amber Press 2023). Her PhD, awarded in 2023, comprised a poetic biography of French novelist and utopian socialist George Sand, and a dissertation. She was awarded an Outstanding Dissertation Prize from the Visual and Performing Arts SIG of the American Educational Researchers Association in 2024.

Kimberly K. Williams is a poet from Detroit who now lives in Queensland, Australia. She has three books of poetry and one book of translations of the Mexican poet Benjamin Valdivia. Her second book of poetry, *Sometimes a Woman* (Recent Work Press 2021), won the 2022 WILLA Literary Award for Poetry. Her third book of poetry, *Still Lives*

(Gazebo Books 2022), won a Canberra Critics Award in 2023 and was shortlisted for the ACT notable poetry book of the year. From 2019–2022, she was the recipient of an Australian Government RTP Scholarship which allowed her to complete her PhD in 2023. She is an associate lecturer at Central Queensland University.

Angela Costi is also known as Αγγελική Κωστή (Aggeliki Kosti) among the Cypriot diaspora, which is her heritage and ancestry. She is a poet and writer with a social justice, law and community arts work history. Her latest book is *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New* (Spinifex Press 2021), winner of the Poetry Prize in English, Greek Australian Cultural League 2022. Her latest chapbook is *Adversarial Practice* (Cordite Poetry Review 2024), commended in the Wesley Michel Wright Prize 2024. She lives in Naarm and was awarded the High Commendation for contribution to Arts and Culture, Merri-bek Award (2021).

Keywords:

Women's poetry, feminism, French literature, Cypriot embroiderers, US pioneering women, segmentivity

Preface

After years of living internationally as an Australian diplomat, I find myself retired and back in Canberra. Nondisclosure agreements stop me from publishing under my real name. Of course, women have been telling their stories anonymously for centuries. You may call me Aka.

Since retirement, I pulled together my poetry and journal writing from my various postings and what has emerged is a hybrid form incorporating poetry, biography and memoir. Each country generated a different engagement with the local women and with the countries' authors. As a woman who worked primarily in a man's world, I was always seeking to excavate untold women's stories. Like other women thinkers (Luce Irigaray, Robin Morgan, Virginia Woolf), I think in women's lineages – lineages of women in families, lineages of influential women thinkers and creatives. Men have had enough written about them already. I do not want to contribute to their 'master narrative'. My work is to retrieve women's stories from the margins: to achieve maximum facility, I use all poetic forms available to me. My work, like my life, like most women's lives, is hybrid – pulling from different forms, techniques and skills allows me greatest expression.

Here I share excerpts from three chapters of my hybrid book. Each chapter is written around a diplomatic posting infused by the flavours and people of the host country and contains both poetry from that time and also nonfiction reflections/explanations of how the poems came to be. My research methodology differs in each chapter as it was influenced by the particular context and constraints of my postings. Many of the poems have been published in journals however, the book is currently sitting with a publisher.

Thinking back, poetry fitted well with my working life – I could bite off a fragment of experience, an episode from a woman's life, and using Blau DuPlessis' idea of segmentivity (1996), cordon that fragment into a poem. I wrote my way through my diplomatic missions, poem by poem. And coffee by coffee. Often, I would write my poems joined by a cup of that country's caffeinated beverage – the greatest challenge being the US coffee, which is often undrinkable! I love the distinctive cups of each country, dainty Cypriot demi-tasse, generous French bowls and the enormous American mugs, which indicate that if you have to drink bad coffee, you will drink a lot of it. Writing in segments/fragments is how many women write anyway, often interrupted and usually multitasking (Marlene Kadar interview, 15 May 2018). My travels have shown me, time and again, that if a woman can enjoy a cup of coffee for company while multitasking, she has some privilege. There is no doubt I have a privileged life, but I hope it has been of service, and it continues to do so.

So, this essay contains excerpts from three chapters that depict three disparate postings in chronological order: Cyprus, France and the United States. Each diplomatic posting afforded a different opportunity to connect to women's stories: in the US, I gravitated to those remarkable pioneer women (women from every class and corner of life: everywoman); in France, I was drawn to the life of a single woman who was perhaps the most renowned woman in her day, novelist George Sand; but I'll start with Cyprus where I grew close to a poet/advocate woman who became intermediary between her relatives, gaining permission for me to tell their stories.

Excerpt from Chapter 3: Stories embroidered

The processes of creativity – the finding of form for thought – have a transformative impact on the sense of self. The embroiderer holds in her hands a coherent object which exists both in the world and inside her head.

– Parker, 2019, p. xx

No amount of warning or training equipped me for the thick veil of grief covering Cyprus. Even though it was 1982, the fallout from the 1974 Turkish occupation was evident in every aspect of a Cypriot's life, whichever side – Greek, Turkish, those wanting independence, those nostalgic for British rule – each carrying the collateral of war. Still, they welcomed me into their homes with *philoxenia*, wanting to know more about Australia. Could they live there? The inevitable question. My answer was always diplomatic. I don't have that role; you need to talk to immigration. Why are you here?! they would respond. And so, their frustration reigned, even in this ancient island accustomed to the comings and goings of bureaucrats and conquerors.

This was the posting that started my love affair with needlecrafts. In particular, Cypriot embroidery, known as *Lefkaritika*, which tantalised the poet in me. The storyline of this embroidery, from its birth to worldwide acclaim, and the skill and artistry of the *ploumarisses* (the women embroiderers) both contributed to a collaborative poetry sequence (Ktori, 2017). One that brought out the centrality of segmentivity – how it is the defining feature of poetry, which is akin to embroidery: “the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap (line break, stanza break, page space)” (DuPlessis, 1996, p. 51).

Embroidery too uses thread to create patterns, juxtaposing worked design and free space so that my two artforms mirror each other. My poetry collaborator, Aggeliki Kosti, was a recent graduate of law with a penchant for community-engaged arts. She was executive assistant to our small team, buoying us with her Cypriot songs towards the end of a challenging week:

stile me mana sto neron στείλε με να παρω νερο μητερα: send me to fetch water, mother
na su do fero dhroseron θα σου το φερω πισω δροσιςτικος: I'll bring it back refreshing

stile me mana sto neron στείλε με να παρω νερο μητερα: send me to fetch water, mother
na su do fero gatharon θα σου το φερω πισω καθαρο: I'll bring it back clean

(Stamna, Σταμνα – Cypriot Greek song [Uoryk Soalokin])

Through Aggeliki, I commenced a weekly practice of sitting with three generations of Cypriot women (grandmother, mother and daughter) as they patiently showed me how to take a cut linen piece, a needle and a thread to make my first simple, awkward-looking tablecloth. In comparison to their intricate geometric designs of *yemoto* and *kofto*, with various sophisticated allusions to *potamos* (river), *klonoto* (branch-like) and *arachnati* (spider-like), mine was an embryonic attempt. However, as we sat each week, thread-like words arrived. Aggeliki and I worked these words into a sequence of lines and gaps, into segments of images, alluding to storyline:

when grandmothers used thread to make stories
 their candles melting

fingers aflame
 with power to listen each stitch a life or death

grief was cut into linen embroidered into a window for fairy
 or moth to peek through

Aggeliki's maternal grandmother, Maroulla, was an established *ploumarissa* with years of experience and known for her skill in creating the wavy *potamos* or scalloped edging. Maroulla was originally from Skarinou village in the Limassol, Southern district of Cyprus. Skarinou was renowned for the wavy contribution to the intricate needlework of Cypriot embroidery.

Aggeliki and I often sat in Maroulla's kitchen, as it gurgled with *soupa avgolemono* (egg and lemon soup) for anybody who wanted breakfast, lunch or dinner. Maroulla introduced me to the thick creamy coffee made with her *briki* (a small Greek Turkish Cypriot coffee pot). As soon as the coffee boiled, creating a layer of *kaimaki*, she poured it into a demitasse cup. Then brought it, accompanied by a glass of cold water, and plate of *paximathia* (sesame-coated cinnamon biscuits) or *melomakarona* (honey-dipped walnut biscuits). This was my heaven. The food and the company; the company and the food. Maroulla spoke in eloquent metaphors about her embroidery:

This is my book each thread a letter each pattern a story
stitch by stitch the sun rises over here sets over there

Maroulla wanted Aggeliki and me to know about the history of *Lefkaritika*. How it created wealth for an island state challenged by poverty, and importantly, how it was the women of Cyprus who showed initiative to take it from the domestic to commercial enterprise. She told us that in 1903 a woman, Alisavou Papaloisou, saw the embroidery as more than dowry items for a bride – it was merchandise (UNESCO, 2009, n.p.). She was the first to create an enterprising economy of exporting embroidery to countries like Egypt, and further on to Europe. Women were making intricately designed items for dining tables, beds, dressers ... and they got young men to sell them overseas, door to door. There were years when Maroulla was the sole provider for her large family, as her husband was in Australia. Her embroidery raised her five children and kept poverty at bay. This was a story of feminism and restitution of female contribution, both cultural and economic, to the history of Cyprus.

The more popular and overly documented story of *Lefkaritika* concerns the Venetians. They occupied Cyprus (1489–1571), leaving behind samples of their embroidered work. The Cypriot women adapted Venetian designs into their embroidery. Around about this time, Leonardo da Vinci visited Cyprus and took an embroidered lace altar cloth back for the Milan Cathedral – it is said to cover the table in his painting *The Last Supper* (UNESCO, 2009, n.p.). In any event, it is women's work that is being lauded on the old Cypriot *lira* (banknote) and acknowledged by

UNESCO on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. This is in accord with Sara Ahmed's observation:

we can think of feminism as happening in the very places that have historically been bracketed as not political: in domestic arrangements, at home, every room of the house can become a feminist room ... (2017, pp. 3–4)

Together Aggeliki and I sat to create a continuum of Maroulla's journey. Like me, Aggeliki doesn't have the skill of embroidery. However, we share the poetic stitch and with this in common we wrote:

In Memory of Maroulla Elliseou (*nee* Kosti, 1914–2003)

I see her as I see me sitting on chairs before the impact of our craft
 both intent on making a story from a sequence a gift out of repetition
 her stitch is my letter her design is my phrase
 thread weave through out and in
 She is framed by a mountainous fig tree
 I have the hallway of wedding and christening photos
 her eyes meld to hands to thread to *tsimbi* to *glosi*
 to caterpillar turrets to butterfly balconies
 to geometrical dreamscapes of Venetian ladies
 for Leonardo da Vinci to take to Rome
 to robe the table for the last supper
 to paint and adorn the Milan Cathedral that is the myth from linen
 She is the story on linen
 no longer a woman in a small village sitting under a tree
 for days months years
 of thread weave through out and in
 our skin an embroidery of old maps and new
 Lefkara Larnaca Kyrenia Hartchia
 Riverwood Bankstown Lalor Reservoir
 thread weave through out and in
 she lives in each strand of cotton perle white brown ecru
 she makes houses rivers wells trees caves
 for secret lovers lost children dying soldiers
 she peeks through *gofti* through fairy windows sees me
 letter by letter crossing the keyboard
 thread weave through out and in
 she sees her children's children not work in fields harvesting rotten crops
 not work in factories making hard rough poisonous things
 not work in shops selling fried food
 she sees a series of baby girls named after her dressed in white
 she lives in the stroke of a foreign letter by letter word by word
 thread weave through out and in

Excerpt from Chapter 5: A maestro with the scissors

Historically, through the centuries, [embroidery] has provided both a weapon of resistance for women and functioned as a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to the norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence.

– Parker, 2019, p. xix

After Cyprus, I was promoted to First Secretary in Paris. DFAT were pleased with my tentative work towards reconciliation. The women embroiderers put political and ethnic affiliation aside to focus on their craft and we established informal networks of cultural exchange.

Having studied undergraduate French, I was thrilled to have a position that used a language I loved. This was a senior appointment in an era when it was still unusual for women to gain leadership positions. I had to prove myself. Although I was very happy to practise my French again and partake of Parisian life, I had some trouble giving up that delicious strong Cypriot coffee with its creamy layer of *kaimaki*. I soon made the transition and grew to adore my soup-bowl-like morning milky *café au lait*.

Once established at the embassy, I sought to consolidate my creative energies. I wanted to focus on just one woman in depth, flexing my poetic skills in poetic biography. I settled on George Sand, prolific novelist and socially progressive woman, largely forgotten outside of French and US academies. I wrote, then with a view to the US market published a 130-poem collection in English describing her remarkable life. Still primed to handcrafts of all kinds through my friendship and subsequent poetry composition, inspired by the embroidery of my Cypriot friends, it was Sand's sewing skills that first sparked my connection to her. I learnt that she had designed all and sewn many of the costumes for one hundred puppets, which her son Maurice had carved from linden-wood, for her home marionette theatre.

Sand's capacity to ply a needle was my creative entry point into her life, but sewing and suturing were also repeatedly used metaphorically in commentaries on her life and literature to discuss her vision of what she defined as a "socially responsible artist" (Naginski, 1991, p. 228). The image of suturing as social repair became an abiding metaphor in my work – Sand's desire to "suture" French class divisions, to sew the material and the sacred together, and to heal rifts between labour and art (Bizet, 2009, p. 76). Her approach resonated deeply with me after my exposure to the Cypriot embroiderers who used their sewing to elevate the status of women. All my creative projects to date had this focus on the restitution of women's voices. Still, I asked, why was it that women's voices had fallen through the seams? This question continued to drive me to uncover and reveal under-represented women's voices. How could I use my literary suturing, my poetic restitution, to make the social fabric more complete, more whole by sewing women's stories back in?

Sand used many avenues to pursue what has been called her "eudæmonistic" motivation – seeking "well-being" for others – including becoming an ardent supporter of the class struggle (2009, p. 3048). Her mother came from working people and her father's line was aristocratic. Her mother

also had exceptional sewing skills and planned at one point to open a *boutique de modiste*, a hat shop (Sand & Jurgrau, 1991, p. 570). Unusually for a semi-aristocrat of her day, Sand learnt to value people regardless of class affiliation and she sought to use her writing – novels, nonfiction and, later, plays to contribute to a more just society. One of Sand's first teachers was her playmate Ursule, from whom she also incidentally learnt to sew. In the poem "Ursule Josse (*Caquetbec*) looks back", Ursule describes how close the girls were: "We slept in the big bed together, ate *en famille* / our two heads in the one bonnet" (Naginski, 1991, p. 225).[1] Ursule became a seamstress, and later in the same poem, continuing in her voice and referring to Sand by her natal name, Aurore, I wrote:

Sewing has served me well. I even went back
to teach Aurore, who'd never held a needle

in her life, how to whipstitch her first baby's layette.

Sand uses this episode in her autobiography to develop her ideas about the dignity of labour, both working class and women's labour, writing "that there, as everywhere, one could be creative; one could be a maestro with the scissors" (Sand & Jurgrau, 1991, p. 835). Additionally, she claimed that sewing at all periods of her life had "calmed [her] greatest agitations" (Sand & Jurgrau, 1991, p. 835). Sand's advocacy for women's cultural contribution was not always overt or strident but it was extensive. I intended the following poem to reflect Sand's subtle feminist assertion – furnishing homes and organising or sewing drapes is female, usually unappreciated, domestic work. However, in Sand's vision, even fabric can "inform the history of humankind" (Sand & Jurgrau, 1991, p. 835).

George Sand ruminates on the drapes

1850s, Nohant

History thus makes use of everything: a merchant's bill,
a cookbook, a laundry list; that is how twenty-seven lengths
of green velvet can inform the history of humankind.

G. Sand & T. Jurgrau, 1991, p. 835

Deep green, redolent of forest and fir
tree. Nap lush enough to run your fingers

through. Grandmama buys them to
redrape the whole chateau – twenty

seven lengths for all the mullioned
windows, all the terrace doors. To dress

them in finery, to bring hints of foliage
inside. But her last illness overcame

her plans. Instead they lead a sheltered
life, not swinging in scent-laden summer

days as expected. Not absorbing angry
recriminations grandmama and mama

fling at each other, fighting over me in
the salon. Not sheltering me in my boudoir

as I write through the cold shiver of
winter nights. Saved the ravages of moths,

the indignity of retirement, saved the
chagrin of replacement – new, younger

drapes with nap still springy and thick.
They sleep the revolution through, folded

and fallow, missing the messy loves-gone-
wrong, drunken confessions, squeals

of children at play. Deep in their cotton
sleeves, they slumber through the decades,

hidden in Grandmama's camphor chest.
After my death, Solange's daughter, Aurore,

finds them, shakes out decades of dust
and restores them to glory. Now they hang

where Grandmama always intended, verdant
picture-window framing. Deep within their

knowing, in the way of inanimate things;
witnessing, absorbing. Green inside and out.

Sand's appreciation of and desire to valorise manual labour was not pretension – she was said to be able to dig in her garden for many hours (White, 2018, p. 64). Her endurance extended to her literary endeavours too and, like Sand, I also have a capacity for hard work, able to combine my diplomatic responsibilities with my poetic research and composition – in whichever country my mission entails. Sand wrote most days from 11pm until the early hours, even when sick or grieving.

George Sand describes writing in the small hours

1931, Nohant

These hours I like so very much –
deep silence sonorous as a bell,
toll, toll, tolling me to my desk

and my hours of labour and delight.

Scrabble and scrape, hoot and screech.
Companioned by the industry of owls,

Cricri's chirp. Sounds I add to the night –
scratch of my quill, riffling of my
papers, *ppht* when I strike a match.

Despite the success of her literary career, Sand expressed the preference to have lived “by the labour of [her] hands” (as cited in White, 2018, p. 62):

To like hard work is the farmer's simple and profound maxim which every man and woman can utter without risking the inference of bondage. On the contrary, it is through hard work that our destiny escapes that rigorous law whereby man is exploited by man. (Sand & Jurgrau, 1991, p. 835)

Her writings, which valorised working people's labour, sought not only to suture French class divisions but also the rift between creative practice and manual labour. Sandian scholar Claire White observes that:

Writing emerges from these fraught recollections, then, as a displaced form of manual work, which allows Sand to sidestep the structure of exploitation and domination (*'l'état de maître'*) that she deplores, but which can never fully suture together those class divisions that cut across social forms of production and consumption. (White, 2018, p. 63)

Sand's support of the working people and peasantry around her estate was a practical form of socialism, where she administered simple herbal remedies, and provided ongoing financial and nutritional support for those who needed it, as well as paying higher than usual wages to those who worked for her.

The author ponders the weight of George Sand's literary estate

A one-kilogram ingot of gold is about the size of a mobile phone. In 1880, four years after her death Sand's children Maurice and Sol sold the rights to her enormous literary estate for the equivalent of 36 kilos of gold. Imagine 36 mobile phone-sized bars of gold. Surprisingly heavy. 125,000 francs for her entire estate, worth nearly 2 million dollars today. When alive she sold her autobiography for 130,000 francs. The highest paid author in her day, yet income was paycheque to paycheque. She had inherited a small *château* employed domestic staff. Always had a cauldron of soup on the range for the hungry. Even though she didn't believe charity would prompt social change, she gave away over one million dollars during her life but sometimes her shoes had holes or she went without a winter coat.

Sand may not have been able to fully suture national class divides, as White observes, but on a local level she was more effective; peasants and agricultural workers on Sand's rural estate wrote the following words and attached them to a wreath placed on Sand's tomb (Salmon, 1931, p. 98):

The peasants of Nohant write on the occasion of George Sand's death

A found poem. Placed with a wreath
on her tomb 1876, Nohant

This is from
the peasants of Nohant

not from the
poor – for

thanks to her, no-one
here was poor.

At the time of encountering Sand, I had been shaped by diplomacy – hallmarked by restraint and discretion. Sand in contrast was a flamboyant woman who enacted strong values in her literary life. I hope some of her exuberance and self-expression rubs off as I continue writing towards a fuller expression of myself.

Excerpt from Chapter 8: Stitches

When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorised as craft ...The professional branch of embroidery ... was from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, largely in the hands of working-class women, or disadvantaged middle-class women ... embroidery and crafts associated with “the second sex” or the working class are accorded lesser artistic value.
– Parker, 2019, p. 5

Hard work. That's what we have all in common: the Cypriot women, George Sand, myself, and the pioneering women I was soon to encounter. We each balanced work and creating, tending to others in so many ways, while serving something larger than the self.

One of my later postings was as Deputy High Commissioner at the Australian Consulate on 42nd Street in New York. What a city! Compared to Cyprus or the south of France, it thrummed with the crossings of people and languages from so many places – all of these weavings of lives but in constant motion. In my free time, I could easily make the eight-minute walk to the NY Public Library and wander the various rooms or find a desk in the main reading room and read and write until I lost track of time.

But by the end of the first summer, I needed to get some space away from that city and the pressure of responsibility. It was humid, crowded and loud. During my leave, I hired a car and drove. And drove. I left the rolling green hills just west and north of the city and drove into the flat plains of the Midwest. That took a couple of days. I spent the night in Toledo, and then kept on. The plains stretch out forever. Sometime after driving over the flattest landscape I'd ever seen, Nebraska became Colorado, and then mountains, massive as the beds of giants, arose from seemingly nowhere. And I thought about the path I'd travelled and the women who'd crossed it

before me, but instead of driving a comfortable hired car, they drove oxen and wagons filled with children and furniture – all of their possessions in the world rolling on thin wooden wheels. And I began to wonder what these women's lives were like.

When I returned to New York, I had a new purpose at the library. I found and read the diaries and journals of these women, reading their letters and learning their stories. I would carry a paper cup filled with burned coffee and a croissant down the windy streets of New York and wonder how these women did it, making their own biscuits and coffee and managing their families on the way. After many months of walking, wondering and reading, the poems just came – sometimes almost whole:

I dream that a bear tears through the
wagon wall, shredding the canvas,
muzzle dripping with saliva (the
forest seething beneath the silence)
her claws the biggest hooks I've ever
seen. But in the dream the bear is
blind to me. She is on the molasses,
smashing the jar and licking her paw
her tongue broad as a hand broom.
She is loud and standing upright
makes her tired. She backs down.
Our wagon is in arrays. She ambles
away and the baby is gone.
Vanished. I startle and Dolly holds
my face – *mama*, she says. My eyes
open to blackness. Sleep keeps away
the rest of the night.

Later, walking behind the
wagon I can no longer pull
the dream thread, but its feeling
bleeds through as we trudge
across the afternoon, mama
bear tugging against memory
like a cloud on the days
when the sun just won't

stay. Here,

something is always

infernal: heat sun flies mud wet that won't dry hard rain no rain hail

sun

flies

mud

wet

that

won't

dry

hard

rain

no

rain,

hail, us

frozen

when

the sun

drops down

Sometimes I would imagine the fear that the women felt. How vulnerable they were. In the era that they migrated, from about 1840 to 1860, women had so few legal rights. I would think about how the woman writer is not much different than any of these "pioneering" women. Poet Alicia Suskin Ostriker, in her book, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, asserts that "'Tell all the truth but tell it slant' speaks for writers who in every century have been inhibited both by economic and legal dependence and by the awareness that *true writer* signifies assertion while *true woman* signifies submission" (1987, p. 6). When I first read those words, I wondered how George Sand would have responded, having inherited her chateau but gaining financial independence through her own earnings – a remarkable feat.

The death of Sand's father when she was young and the later intermittent supervision of her grandmother meant that Sand was afforded an unusual degree of freedom, though it also occasioned the painful forced separation from her mother. In contrast, in the US, at this time, if a husband or a father decided that the family would go West, then the women, wives and daughters, had no choice but to follow, and along the way they mostly bore the brunt of the daily chores.

They cooked, cleaned, cared for the children, mended clothes, acted as medics, packed and unpacked the wagons and then packed them yet again. One book I read mentioned that pregnant women were seldom able to deliver babies and rest for a few days because it would hold up the whole wagon train (Schlissel, 1992). And that was if they survived giving birth. Diaries and journals that remain show how many women did not expect to live. I also noted the parallels and intersections with the oral stories passed down by older Cypriot women. Similar stories of isolation, when a woman from a small village or a woman from the vast plains miraculously lived through childbirth. One woman noted in her diary, her doubt that “anything whatever could relieve or comfort me under my present very depressing condition of health” (as cited in Hoffert, 1991, p. 277).

As I drove through these cavernous spaces, crossing over the land these women had previously crossed I tapped into the loneliness. And as I read excerpts from their diaries and read the articles, I began to realise that anything a woman accomplished in any given day, even darning a sock, would have been a small miracle. And so their days and thus their lives were stitched together with these tiny miracles. These women, who had names that no one remembers, became Everywoman to me as I imagined their journeys compared to my own.

As I composed poems in their voices, I found that the poems themselves wanted to move – to take up space. Women are so seldom invited to take up space in our world in any form – they should be neat, tidy and slim. The messages to keep ourselves contracted are clear. However, the poems that were arriving wanted to stretch and breathe and make use of the whole page at times. Sometimes they even wanted to wander. They wanted to be fragmented yet connected, something like this:

On nights I cannot sleep, I hold the blanket against my shoulders, knowing the stars lie on the other side of the canvas. I sleep in my boots. I have not removed them in days. We do not bathe for lack of water. No one comes up behind. No one passes opposite.

**

Sometimes vastness. When you're in the midst of it, surrounded by it. Hard to comprehend sand dry grass wheel ruts. I try to clasp a few objects: *focus on what I can touch*.

Overhead:
grey is wide.
Bright blue is yet wider
But it's the brown
that never
ends.

We come across the Baptists. They ask: *Are you leaning on the Lord?* I want to answer that our wagon will not lean unless the ruts demand it and then we risk going over. I want to mention

there is no road. No trail. There is nothing
to lean against. Not even a post.

We pass emptiness for days – only us moving in one direction, wind in the other. And then when
you do cross, they want you to lean.

But you cannot tell
this to the Baptists.

Nothing is smooth.

I think of holding my mother's bowl: dark glossy blue
feeding into indigo, both hands cupping the sides, coolness
contouring my fingers.

Whereas the edges out here are
rough – jagged like cloth torn on a tack. Life is a rusty nail
catching us hourly. We move slow like beetles, up a hill.
We are no larger than that. How does a beetle lean on the
Lord?

**

I have to tell that there is a whole story. There is a whole other life. Before this life. This whole
other dream. When I wake up today, what is before me is mostly forgotten. Just a stitch. Just a
stitch comes later when the wagon stops and I want to tug that stitch into a thread I can remember
and pull back into the dream. But it's fuzzy. It hovers like a raven on the current. And it does not
land. This stitch. This stitch without a cloth. It is like the letter *A*. *A* without the rest of a word. A
V inverted and carrying a cross. Even *V* has its cross to bear.

**

The current sucks
us in spits us
out the eddy.

Small stitches
enclose
 frayed
 nerves.

Some of the women on the trails were literate, but they often didn't have time to write. When they did, they would only be able to write snippets. This of course is how women creators have had to operate for most of their lives. My research showed, for example, that in the 1970s, as more and more women worked outside the home during daytime, there was a marked uptick in the publication of women's long poems that used sequences, allowing for interruption and fragmentation. As a working woman, I found this the case for myself. I might be working on my poems on a weekend, and I would get a call from the consulate that needed my immediate attention. I would leave off my poems to deal with the situation at hand. Writing in sequenced fragments – DuPlessis' segmentivity – has allowed women a type of freedom within their domestic and professional restrictions. The women who went westward in the middle of the nineteenth century knew this, and at the turn of the twenty-first century, this hadn't changed.

Susan Stanford Friedman, in her chapter, "Craving Stories: Narrative and Lyric in Contemporary Theory and Women's Long Poems", has a section called 'Historical Narratives' where she mentions that:

The long poem as social history is closely related to long poems that narrate personal history, the story of the self, autobiography in poetic form; for stories of individual lives often claim a certain representability as history of more than one. (1994, p. 28)

When I found Friedman's thoughts, I understood how I inadvertently inserted myself into a quiet tradition just by following my impulse to write these wide and wandering poems of these women's lives. Friedman insists that "All these different claims on historical discourse implicitly insist upon the right and necessity for the poet to engage in history making – both the interpretive narration of an era and the telling itself as a significant act in history" (1994, p. 30). It's how the Cypriot women used their embroidery – in Sand's words – to "inform the history of humankind". And I realised that this was the thread that follows through all my poetry projects. As a poet, my instinct to take on the subject matters I've been drawn to has been "a right and necessity" – a making of history, or histories, filling in the gaps left by the more common and patriarchal narratives. It is a type of reclamation. A restoration, if you will. Alicia Suskin Ostriker encapsulates this idea aptly:

That women are culturally muted not only in the present but in the scannable past, as far back into recorded history as we can trace, has become a commonplace of feminist criticism and cultural history, and is reflected in the absence of nostalgia from contemporary women's poetry ... (1987, p. 67)

Some of my poems turned out to be prose poems – taking full use of the page from left to right, and then emulating the nineteenth-century women's journal writing. Prose poems as diary entries. And then sometimes it would start that way, and the poems would begin to move again. I just let them.

Sept 12 – Types of Heavens

We make it past the date. I try walk right past it, but it's impossible sometimes when all we do is walk into the distance. When all we do is march farther away. How much farther away will we

go? Sometimes distance is just distance, & how far doesn't matter. You don't think about what you have to leave behind in the ground. You don't think about the bones & skin & hair tucked into the earth. You don't think about the gingham dress that you sewed with joy, Clara having grown again as she's supposed to do. You try to walk right by it, but. That tree there? That happy pine becomes the box you bury.

**

I have a hole
in my shoe that lets in the dust. I
have a hole in my pocket; from it
I drop the seeds
one
at a time
as we walk. I'm not supposed to.
Wasted seeds. Nothing trampled will
grow. I want to see this for myself. I

imagine that
someday there will be an immense
row marking our trail – not cotton or
corn but sun-
flowers green and leaning,
yellow & brown
palms waving towards
the light like
friendly hands!

I let the seeds fall
from my pocket. One. Then another.
Two steps – drop – releasing always
when my right foot's forward.

Secret

This morning I awoke with a start. I lay back drifty and comfy. Then the gagging smell of our animals carried on bursts of wind and would not cease. I arose. Does no one else smell the fury? And no one's about but the yawning sun and me. And a little frost marking summer's end.

I hold these stories in my head. Narrate to myself. Every version of each story I ever told to myself. Is it just a busy head? It's more. No one knows. About any of it. Not the busy notions. Not the sweet arrival. Not the departure. The constant ache in my lower back like hot coals trapped in my corset where my hips become my backside. The taste of iron in my mouth when I awaken like someone shoved silver slivers in my mouth while I'm asleep.

The coffee always tastes burnt like black tastes bitter. No one else tastes it. No one else knows.

“It’s not a pin”: Collaborative threads

The needle is used to repair damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it’s not a pin.

– Bourgeois, 1997 (cited in Parker, 2019, p. xix)

I have met so many women during my diplomatic career, including female consular counterparts from other countries and partners of colleagues, but also domestic staff at the embassies (who keep life going at an essential and often invisible level), and women who lead cultural and political organisations. I have treasured these connections for the friendship, which was generously offered, for the women’s open sharing of their homes, hearts and minds, and for their willingness to travel on journeys of the imagination with me, resulting in my poems and writing. Many of these women have inspired my research and poetry and I thank them and acknowledge their invaluable contributions and collaborations.

Women of middle and advanced ages are often invisible in the world. I often feel unseen, despite trying to follow Sand’s example. But I can still see that sliver of window offered by the needle as I thread through memory. Again and again and again. Retirement offers a certain perspective, a looking back that allows me stitch by stitch to sew my past into an embroidery of integrated maps, including the voices and stories of women who have awakened within me a need to creatively document a larger picture. And I see that for much of my working life, I was learning to be part of this larger embroidery, tapestry, quilt.

Note

[1] “Two heads in the one bonnet” is a French colloquialism denoting intimacy.

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Acknowledgement

Parts of this work were made possible through an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.