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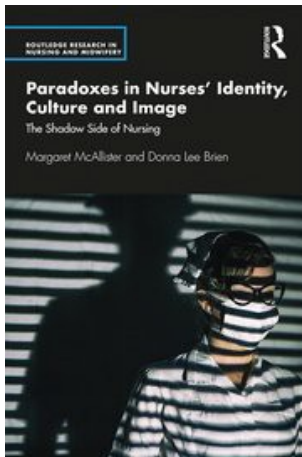
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Un/becoming nurse: good and bad realities of representation as representation

review by Amelia Walker



Margaret McAllister and Donna Lee Brien

Paradoxes in Nurses' Identity, Culture and Image: The Shadow Side of Nursing

Routledge, Abingdon OX 2020

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...to be a good nurse one must be a good woman... What makes a good woman is the better or higher of their nature: Quietness, Gentleness, Patience, Endurance, Forbearance. (Florence Nightingale in McAllister and Brien 2020: 8)

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. (Simone de Beauvoir 1949 [2010]: 330)

“People like you aren’t meant to be nurses.”

These words, levelled at me by the university lecturer who supervised my final third year placement, stayed with me throughout my five-year career(ing) as a registered nurse in hospitals, aged care, and community settings across South Australia and Victoria. The context of these words was that of her informing me I had failed the placement and she considered me unfit for practice – indeed, unfit for work of any kind. “People like you are what the disability pension was made for,” were the next words that she uttered.

I begin this review of Margaret McAllister and Donna Lee Brien’s *Paradoxes in Nurses' Identity, Culture and Image* with this very personal and revealing anecdote in order to offer a sense of the very particular perspective from which I come to their text. Where nursing is concerned, I am both and neither insider and outsider, having worked my final shift just on a decade ago when I decided to invest my energy into pursuing a PhD in creative writing. This mode of situatedness makes my reading of Brien and McAllister neither more nor less privileged than any other, but it does lend a specificity that seems worth signalling, in line with my postmodernism-influenced belief that all writing perspectives bear their own different kinds of bias, and that the fairest move where readers are concerned is thus to reveal, rather than conceal, the nature of the bias at play. Adopting Timothy Bewes’s argument for critical reading strategies that are ‘always, in part, a reading of ourselves reading’ (Bewes 2010: 28), this review takes an intimate approach to describing the deeply transformative and even liberating impact *Paradoxes in Nurses' Identity, Culture and Image* bears for me as a reader simultaneously so close to and yet severed from its subject matter.

“People like you aren’t meant to be nurses.”

As I’ve already stated, these words stayed with me my whole nursing career. For five years they were my burden and my fire, driving me to prove wrong what meanwhile drove me to despair. My shock when I first heard them was amplified by the fact I had always been, on the whole, a good student, and thus assumed I could make a decent nurse. Upon finishing school, my grades were above the entry mark for medicine, but I chose nursing because my not-entirely-false perception was that doctors just diagnosed and prescribed, having little to do with the hands-on day-to-day physical and psycho-social aspects of care such as bathing, comforting, tending to wounds, and most crucially, listening to the concerns, fears, frustrations, hopes, and other things people struck down by illness or injury might wish to share. A Catholic upbringing and childhood infatuation with Mother Theresa probably had something to do with this. Through university, my grades had been up and down, due initially to manic and depressive episodes that rendered my focus erratic, and then later to the slow, oft-frustrating process of accepting my bipolar diagnosis and adjusting to side effects of treatments my psychiatrist of the time prescribed. Nonetheless, I had managed through all that to at least pass every course, and excel in some, achieving an overall grade average that placed me on the Dean’s Honour list.

“People like you are what the disability pension was made for.”

To fail outright was for me unprecedented and unexpected. And for the reason given to be that of my diagnosis was a shock that sucked the very voice from my throat. My voice was what had gotten me in trouble, through my naive explanation to this lecturer, who had won my trust, that my new medication was causing my hands to tremor and that this might temporarily make me slower than usual at fiddly tasks like drawing up medications, but that

my doctor assured me this would settle in time and pose no impediment to my ability to complete all necessary duties. I had not anticipated that a health care professional working in a tertiary education setting would be so ignorant and closed-minded as to hold discriminatory attitudes against people with mental health diagnoses, nor that a mentor who had previously seemed supportive could turn and cut me down in this sudden, sharp way.

If only *Paradoxes in Nurses' Identity, Culture and Image* had been available to me at the time. I would have read and understood that mental illness retains such great stigma, within nursing culture as beyond it, that even nurses who simply work in mental health are tainted with fear and suspicion (84, 107). As McAllister and Brien observe, '[e]ven though nurses are trained in, and endorse, evidence-based practice, they are not above believing in superstitions' – and stereotypes (85). Nurses are, as much as any members of society, prone to be swayed by the persisting myths about mental illness as 'synonymous with *losing one's mind*' and thus to 'believe that people with mental illness are all erratic, impulsive or violent' (107, italics in original). Mental health thus represents one aspect of nursing's "shadow side" (7), which, drawing on the theories of Carl Jung (1959 [2014]), McAllister and Brien treat as 'a hidden, opposite side to our self which is repressed into the unconscious', consisting of 'primitive, negative or socially disparaged emotions like lust, anger and shame' (7). Observing Jung's claim that "everyone carries a shadow, and the less embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is" (Jung in McAllister and Brien 2020: 7), and in line with the broad Jungian notion that repressed shadow archetypes stored within the collective unconscious tend to be 'projected onto unwitting adversaries', McAllister and Brien pose that in health care contexts, nurses' projections of 'their own unprocessed anxieties' can manifest in multiple ways including 'lateral violence directed towards other nurses' as well as unfair treatment towards patients and doctors (7).

"People like you aren't meant to be nurses."

At long last, reading McAllister and Brien lent a context and explication to my placement supervisor's act of linguistic violence. Furthermore, it helped me frame and make sense of the many additional confusions and frustrations encountered after I ultimately repeated the placement, gained my BA nursing, and entered the workforce – things made possible through the efforts of a caring and committed disability support officer who argued my right to have a second shot at the placement with a different supervisor unaware of my condition. Needless to say, I was from that point onwards incredibly careful about the information I disclosed to other people, in both personal and professional contexts. My diagnosis, which had previously provided what seemed a helpful narrative for navigating life with my condition and explaining my scenario to others, became my greatest shame and secret. Though I could not push it from my own consciousness, I made intensive efforts to keep colleagues and most friends unaware. I thereby became complicit in the social erasure of the fact that *people like me* can, with the right forms of support, manage to work, contribute, and live full lives. In other words, I participated in society's expurgation of mental illness into the collective unconscious, thus maintaining "madness" as something uncanny, something abject, as opposed to something with which at least one in five of us live and often live well, something commonplace and everyday that need not elicit such irrational fears.

“People like you are what the disability pension was made for.”

In certain senses, that I finally did graduate and work as a nurse for a sustained period indicates that I achieved my goal of proving my first placement supervisor's judgement to be false. Yet note the wording in my sentence: *work as*. Is working as a nurse the same as being one? Or becoming one in the sense Simone de Beauvoir once suggested that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, woman?’ (1949 [2010]: 330). For five years, I had the ever-present secret sense of still really only trying to become the nurse my title and diploma suggested me to be. I wore my uniform beautifully – so beautifully they photographed me for the promotional brochure of the nursing agency I was working for at the time. But the nurse in that photo was a stranger: she was the character I played when I put on her costume and stepped onto the stage known as a ward. For five years, every minor slip or oversight was evidence that my first placement supervisor, after all, had been right: I simply wasn't, and never could be, nursing material.

For a long time, the promotional photo gave me chills I couldn't comprehend. *Paradoxes in Nurses' Identity, Culture and Image* enables me, at last, to understand why. With her blonde hair, slender frame and white skin airbrushed of acne spots, this groomed, gentle-seeming young woman – who for the record barely resembled the crumpled-shirt sight I often made when leaping from my bicycle at ten-to-seven in the morning after riding for an hour or more to one of the outer suburbs aged care homes where my agency frequently sent me – was a problematically gendered and racialized recitation of what McAllister and Brien describe as the ‘good nurse’ trope or what is sometimes represented as “‘the angel in the house’” (8-9). Stemming from Florence Nightingale's association of nursing capacity with the ‘nineteenth century image of perfect womanhood’, and thus with ‘being demure, compliant, composed and self-abrogating’, the good nurse trope persists into the twenty-first century as ‘a powerful symbol... reproduced across a wide range of media, including novels, music, poetry and film’ (9). As McAllister and Brien note, the good nurse trope is ‘so prevalent that it is widely accepted not only by patients but within nursing itself’, despite the fact that ‘[i]n reality, individual nurses often act in ways that defy this notion’ (9). Indeed, it would seem that in order to perform their roles well, individual nurses in fact must defy the good nurse stereotype, for:

[n]urses cannot be demure when they are expected to take responsibility. They cannot be emotional when they need to be impartial decision makers. They also cannot risk placing themselves in clinical situations that are beyond their competence. (9)

However, despite this and despite ‘radical social, cultural, technological and bio-medical reforms in the last 150 years, not least of which has been a considerable increase in the number of male nurses’, the prevailing cultural power of the good nurse trope means that ‘when nurses fail to live up to the stereotype, they are sanctioned’ (9). This is one of the paradoxes of nursing identity signalled in the book's title, and a paradox I understand with deep intimacy, having lived and felt it every time I gazed at that fixed image of the sweetly smiling nurse, who was me, but who I would never be.

Earlier I wrote of *working as* a nurse while having *the ever-present secret sense of still really only trying to become the nurse I was already meant to be*. After reading McAllister and Brien, it is patent to me that my anxieties weren't simply about whether or not a

“person like me” could be or become a nurse. The real problem was that I not only feared, but knew – for this is true – that I wasn’t, and could never be, the good nurse that haunted and still haunts the cultural imaginations of western-dominated societies like those of Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and many former UK colonies. I use the word *haunts* because the good nurse is impossible and as uncanny as any of the other, more shadowy figures that stand behind her – shadows made possible precisely because of her light and by an implied binary logic in which goodness is defined by its inverse, and the good nurse by the bad, ‘transgressive’ (17-32), or indeed ‘monstrous’ (97-110). This includes cultural representations of nurses as ‘battleaxes’ such as the ‘authoritarian and vicious’ Nurse Noakes from David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), and Nurse Ratched from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Kesey 1962), who ‘has reached iconic status’ as ‘the epitome of the monstrous nurse – powerful, grim and pitted against her patients’ (McAllister & Brien 2020: 101-103).

“People like you aren’t meant to be nurses.”

I wanted to prove this judgement wrong, and by qualifying as a nurse, I had done it. But anxiety remained because I feared I had become the wrong kind of nurse – a *bad nurse*. Perhaps not in the same sense as Ratched or Noakes: I was no murderer or sadist. But nothing I ever did seemed to meet more than the baseline expectations. I often questioned my competence, and guilt plagued me in the moments when, as opposed to ‘composed, deferent or compliant’, I behaved in ways that were ‘disengaged, flippant and self-preserving’ (21). Exhausted by the physical and mental demands of a profession that is often ‘simultaneously mundane and disgusting’ in which ‘nurses not only have limited resources with which to deal with adverse circumstances, they also have to cope with a disinterested, but intrusive, bureaucracy that is mismanaged at every level’, I could frequently think of little other than my own preservation: I was simply making it through the rest of the shift – *and the next* – *and the next* – telling myself that doing just enough was good enough, yet meanwhile wracked by guilt that it should have been more (21-23).

These anxieties were amplified by my failure to settle into one medical field or stable work setting: following completion of my compulsory graduate year on a large public hospital, and a brief flirtation with a psychiatric nursing traineeship I ceased because it was all too close to home, the rest of my nursing career was spent doing agency fill-in shifts wherever required, becoming a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. My choice to work for the agency was because it enabled me to dictate my own hours and thus keep stable sleep routines, which helped reduce the likelihood of a bipolar relapse, whereas permanent ward work required that staff rotate on frequently-changing rosters of morning, afternoon, and night duties. This seemed to affirm not only what my supervisor had said, but also the general prejudices expressed by ward nurses against agency nurses as intrinsically suspect and obviously incapable of holding down any “real” nursing position. At last, McAllister and Brien help me understand these prejudices in context: the agency nurse represents a ‘transgressive’ (17) figure because, in contrast to the self-sacrificing and compassionately-motivated ‘good nurse’ (9), the agency nurse puts their own needs and survival first. We were often referred to as “mercenary nurses” in reference to the high pay rates we could pull in the midst of a nursing shortage in the years 2005 to 2008. At that time, the figure of the agency nurse stood in stark contrast with that of the altruistic ‘good nurse’, for whom money is the furthest thought from mind (9).

Although as an early twenty-something I did, in the beginning, enjoy the flexibility and continually surprising nature of agency work – one could rarely get bored – it was lonely having no regular colleagues, and the unpredictability of perpetually stepping into different roles and responsibilities became, in the end, plain exhausting. Hence, after five years, I finally threw things in and left nursing to pursue creative writing. My final shift was on Christmas Eve, in an emergency department in a less-privileged part of town. I'd been called in to mind the failed suicide attempts so that the regular staff could tend to real emergencies. Those eight hours lasted a lifetime, and as I walked out the sliding glass doors at long last, for the last time, my placement supervisor's words rang in my head louder than ever.

"People like you weren't meant to be nurses."

In walking away, I felt I had finally proved them right.

So I thought at the time.

Ten years later, reading *Paradoxes in Nurses' Identity, Culture and Image* gifts me new ways of understanding how and why I both became and failed to become a nurse – good or otherwise. As Brien and McAllister point out, '[t]ransgressions can also be seen as a site of resistance to dominant ideology, where accepted truths are subverted, allowing new thinking on a topic to emerge, possibly eventually prompting change' (17). This reflects Halberstam's argument for failure as an art (2011). McAllister and Brien enable me to re-perceive my failure to become nurse as an artful becoming-otherwise: my clashes with the mainstream hospital system often reflected my stubborn desire towards more actualised ways of being and nursing than those delegated to me by the dominant hospital culture's rigid, unrealistic notions of good versus bad, acceptable versus unacceptable. In line with McAllister and Brien's argument that transgressive representations of nursing often reveal 'that the health care system may itself be flawed' (11), my inability to stay in nursing reflects, I now realise, not "my" failure, but those of hospital and aged care institutions in desperate need of change.

People like me aren't meant to be nurses.

As last I can shift these words into the first person and make them my own. Furthermore, I can recognise that *people like all nurses aren't meant to be nurses*. People work as nurses, yes. And when they work as nurses, they become nurses, in the sense of a becoming that is always in-process and never complete (Hanley 2019). But no nurse ever gets to *be* a nurse, much less discover nurse as what they were always *meant to be*. This entire notion and its echoes of predestination bear, I now realise, the ongoing legacy of nursing's historic connections with religion, particularly nuns (McAllister and Brien, 40). All nurses are only ever people who work as nurses, and thus continually work at becoming nurses as they change, learn, and flow between – as well as flee and take flight from – the various media representations of nurses available. For as McAllister and Brien observe, 'such representations have taken of a fixed and mythic status, from where they inform but also mislead and misdirect... Feeding both wishful thinking and cultural anxieties' (3).

The force of nursing's shadows and mythologies is brought home to me by the fact of recognising my own complicity in maintaining them – through remaining silent about my mental health condition, thus partaking in erasure of *people like me* from the world of work, and through posing for a photograph used to perpetuate a dominant “good nurse” image of everything I was not. That I took part in suppressing nursing's shadow side and upholding its mythologies – even as I myself suffered at the hands of these same cultural notions, eventually leaving the profession as a result of their barbaric force – proves the insidiously treacherous nature of these cultural tropes and tendencies. This underscores the significance of the argument McAllister and Brien present – namely, that ‘the imaging of nurses in popular culture ignores and, even worse, dismisses serious problems that need to be tackled and resolved’ (3) and that nurses ‘have to acknowledge and actively break away from the stereotype of the good nurse’ among other dominant representations (9).

Hence why it is so important to raise awareness of, and enact critique upon, the problematic stereotypes that pervade popular culture representations of nurses and nursing. By tearing open the old tropes and by pushing towards new representations more reflective of diversities in the nursing profession today, such critiques expand out the scope for nurses to re-identify and become beyond the rigid binaries of good/bad historically dreamed up and drilled in through both cultural and formal nursing training. McAllister and Brien enact this mode of critique, and they demonstrate the need for it to be ongoing.

This is an important book that would make an invaluable addition to the curricula of nursing, medicine, and allied health degree programs. It also bears usefulness beyond the health sciences, for the points it makes about how cultural representations of nurses bear on nursing culture as lived by those in the workforce could be transferred across many professional and other platforms in order to explore how the same sorts of phenomena might operate in different ways and with equally problematic differing effects. *Paradoxes in Nurses' Culture, Identity and Image's* power to reveal relationships between representations and realities make it pertinent to learning and research in fields excluding but exceeding screen studies, cultural studies, sociology, linguistics, performance studies, literary studies, and of course, creative writing. Furthermore, this is a highly readable and engaging book of relevance to all those who work, have worked, or merely bear interest in nursing and/or stories about nurses. For me personally its impact was, as I have signalled, transformative and liberating. I therefore close by thanking McAllister and Brien for the careful work they have done and the potential their text has to open up the field. I wholeheartedly agree that:

The reality of nursing work requires very different attributes and skills than what were espoused two centuries ago. Thus, these narratives need to be decoded with a critical stance, or at least with an appreciation for how they cast an image of nursing that no longer holds in practice (162).

Through their interrogation of the shadow side of nursing, McAllister and Brien have contributed significantly towards this task, paving the way for important ongoing inquiries.

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Amelia Walker has published four poetry collections and three poetry teaching resource books. She holds a PhD in creative writing and works as a teaching-only academic at a large South Australian university. She is outgoing co-editor of the TEXT reviews section, and currently co-editing (with Jaydeep Sarangi) a special issue of TEXT featuring Indian and Australian poets in dialogue about culture, place, belonging, identity, and more.



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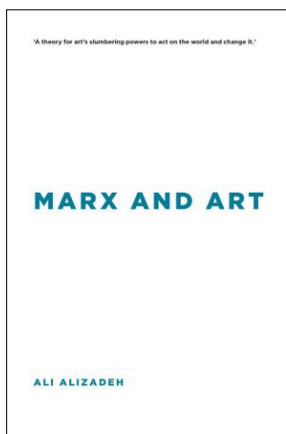
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The labour of art

review by Nicholas Cowley



Ali Alizadeh

Marx and Art

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Ali Alizadeh's *Marx and Art* is a timely book. Its initial comments focussing on neo-liberal valuations of art have taken on a (more) sinister turn as COVID-19 has arrested the supply chains of global capitalism. Take, for example, what the Arts Council England has to say:

The value of the arts and culture to people and society outlines the existing evidence on the contemporary impact of arts and culture on our economy, health and wellbeing, society and education. (1). It is not that this definition lacks meaning or coherence, because as Alizadeh points out there is little satisfaction to be had in highlighting the deficiencies of underpaid arts writers (*ibid*), but rather – as we are seeing – the poverty of thought

regarding the value of the arts has real, material consequences. In Australia, a pointed lack of inclusion into support mechanisms for quarantine relief meant that artists were among the first on the economic chopping block. As the infrastructure for the arts in Australia crumbles in real time, it is important to remind ourselves that the value of art does not lay exclusively in its cathartic or distractive powers, especially at a time when those powers are in their ascendancy for so many of us. Alizadeh sets out to answer the question “what is the intrinsic value of art?” and the form that his response takes is a return to Marx’s works in the original and a recovery of the 19th century philosopher’s theorisations on the topic. Both the question that propels this book, and the form that it takes have an exigency in the current world. The value of art remains ill-defined and undervalued as a human labour, and Marx remains important to on- going critique of capitalism in history and our present moment.

For Alizadeh via Marx, labour has intrinsic value because it transforms the raw materials of nature into things that attend to human needs. Art is then the process that allows us as humans to understand and live with nature, either as an ecological realm, or as the realm of ideology. And, where it is such a process, perhaps even change our relationship to nature and ideology:

We satisfy this need for understanding, theorization, ideation and, finally, assimilation or integration with the world – and indeed, with nature – through practicing art (96-7)

This argument is necessary and pressing because art has suffered longstanding critiques and valuations exclusively on the basis of its extrinsic value, but perhaps, as Alizadeh’s book points out, this has at least something to do with art’s under theorised intrinsic value. The introduction offers a sharp summation of the most fully fleshed and current of those theories on the intrinsic qualities of art by Agamben, Badiou, and Ranciere, even as it points out their shortcomings. Alizadeh’s solution to those shortcomings is a reconstruction of Marx’s theory of art from his major and minor works. Alizadeh’s work provides a powerful theory of art that attends its revolutionary possibilities as much as its material necessities. As a result Alizadeh, via Marx, is able to reveal visions of what un-alienated labour might look like, at least in the labour of making art.

To get to this conclusion, Alizadeh does the work of tracing Marx’s thought back to Plato’s *Republic*. These introductory elements may not be as interesting to the weathered reader of Marx, but I consider them a practical refresher (or introduction) to Marx’s intellectual setting. The way that the book equips the reader with all the necessary tools to understand the pre-history of Marx’s ideas on art is admirable, and lends the text an utility to the academic reader as much as the non-academic, a feature of particular consequence given the wide ranging import of the topic. One need not be an especially dedicated reader of Marx in order to take in Alizadeh’s arguments because of how diligently and concisely he summarises Marx’s philosophical precursors and personal development. I thoroughly

enjoyed Alizadeh's close reading of Marx's juvenile poetry. Perhaps this speaks to my own literary interests, however I would like to credit Alizadeh's ability to situate even juvenilia into its broader cultural contexts of post/-romantic Europe and the young philosopher's interpersonal relationships. Similarly, I relished those passages where Alizadeh tackles Marx's literary criticisms of 19th century European novels, or Wagner, or Homer, or ancient Greek political stunts as concrete examples of Marx's theory of art as labour in action. By eschewing latter-day criticism in favour of Marx's own writings, Alizadeh is able to offer a fresh perspective on Marx as much as the issue at the heart of the book. As a consequence of this approach, the text also clarifies some myths about Marx's intellectual development, especially regarding his so-called break with the humanisms of his time. Rather, Alizadeh offers a novel interpretation on Marx's original writings, and a deft capacity to tease out those ideas Marx had left under-written on art and also romanticism, ideology and spirituality.

Where Alizadeh's argument hinges on the extraction of needs from nature through labour as above, it is not quite as thoroughgoing and well supplied as its other chapters. On the one hand, I thoroughly enjoyed how the text remained faithful to the archaeology of Marx's thoughts without hemming these ideas with the history of thought that was to come after or elsewhere. On the other hand, the conclusion of the book is clear about re-situating those ideas in the present moment, and does so with arch reference to both intersectional and environmental concerns. Considering the necessity of nature to both Marx's conception of concrete labour and to Alizadeh's reading of the production of art, I would have appreciated a rounder discussion of how Nature is conceived of by Marx and how it fits into his critique of capitalism. To some extent I can agree with the charlatanry by which modern universities corrupt the critical functions of intersectional politics into the managerial notions of identity politics, or how those same universities pump out exorbitant expositions on the anthropocene by white scholars while in turn cashing in on coal investment on stolen land and continually side-lining indigenous people and their knowledge (Elam 2019, and Goldrick 2020). However, to eschew any and all ecological concern either in Marx or for right now seems like a missed opportunity. Whichever way that one may theorise the totality that we refer to as Nature, the capitalist mode of production has altered it in ways we must now contend with; in everyday life, in activism, in theory, in work, in play, and in art.

My concern here is not so much, as Alizadeh later says in his concluding remarks, that the concept of nature described in the book adheres to a "passé" (131) version of humanism, because the humanism that Alizadeh considers out of date is alive and well in such university propagated genres as the anthropocene (Todd 2016). Rather my concern is that the ecological critique central to so much of Marx's work is not teased out with the same dexterity that the rest of the book treats Marx's ideas:

When what the worker has produced (an object, a service, etc.) is removed from the

immediate sphere of production and is entered into the market of consumer demands as something with a price, its value becomes subject to the law of supply and demand – the higher the supply, the lower the demand – as a result of which the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. (93)

Alizadeh positions the moment of capitalist alienation in the removal of the labourer's work from their sphere of production but does not account for what that sphere of production means. Twenty years ago, well before the humanities' current fixation with the anthropocene, John Bellamy Foster published another return to Marx's original writings in *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. In doing so Foster drew out Marx's ecological basis for critique of capitalism; that capitalism restructures worker's relationships with their surrounding landscape *at the same time as* restructuring their relationships with the products of their labour. When Marx locates that original moment of capitalist estrangement in the removal of the worker's labour from their sphere of production, that sphere of production explicitly concerns the labourer's ecological setting:

Capitalist exploitation and accumulation, as Marx explains, ultimately depend on capital's usurping of nature's gifts for itself, thereby monopolizing the means of production and wealth in its entirety. (Foster 2018)

I have never considered Marx's reliance on gothic imagery to be a mere stylistic fixation but part and parcel of his need to accurately describe the carnage that capitalism wreaks, so when he says, 'capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx 1976: 926) it strikes me as literal. Land enclosure is of course the most famous case study of Marx's critique of capitalism. Territorial acquisition and control is the vanguard of capitalism, and the on-going genocidal tactics employed against indigenous peoples one of the chief ways in which capital is maintained. And if art is to become an awakened power for us to utilise against capitalism and its alienating properties, then by necessity it must involve a broader appreciation for land rights and ecological thought. Further I believe that Alizadeh's arguments would have been strengthened by just such an account of Marx's ecological arguments within the discussion of the production and necessity of art. I realise that the length of the book could only admit so much, and that it achieves a great deal in its tidy page count, but considering other archaeologies of Marx have pointed out the very ecological basis of Marx's critique of capital, it does seem an oversight at the very least in the current era. For instance, when Alizadeh conjures Adorno in the concluding chapters to attest to both the bleak reality out of which art extrudes meaning, and the increasing difficulty that artists face when performing this labour (120), it echoes Marx's ecological critique of capital:

The fewer the number of natural wants imperatively calling for satisfaction, and the greater the natural fertility of the soil and the favourableness of the climate, so much less is the

labour-time necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the producer. (Marx 1999)

Art may represent a labour that transforms ideology into practicable material, but in our current historical moment, the fertility of our ideological soil is so depleted by the on-going extractive measures of terminal capitalism that the labour we must invest in the endeavour is, as a corollary, made so much more onerous. This could have been readily folded into Alizadeh's summary of Marx and art; that the state of nature (as even a strictly humanist construction) under capitalist alienation is particularly depleted *in the same way and for the same reasons* that artistic labour is depleted by way of capitalist ideology. The culture industry of today is as built on rare minerals extruded from the earth as is the precariat workforce driving for Uber. Further, artists as labourers must pay heed to the extractive nature of capitalism as a core principle of Marxist revolutionary practice as much as they are human beings in the world.

This is perhaps the conclusion's greatest fault; that for all the momentum Alizadeh's argument generates, for all the urgency with which the production of art is granted as a human need and an actual human labour, it is not attendant to the ecological rapaciousness of capitalism and what that might mean for Marx and art, then and now. All that said, I am emboldened by its closing remarks that art has the capacity to offer us a vision of unalienated labour, however bleak our conditions, and however depleted that vision may be because of those conditions. The balancing act of avoiding outright nihilism in the face of terminal capitalism while also maintaining revolutionary sensibilities is no mean feat, and the energetic theorisations contained herein manage that balance capably. I am able to lay aside my concerns because this book provides a meaningful understanding of artistic production that can attempt just such an effort. Stripping back analysis of the value of art to Marx has an immense valence for readers of Marx, for critical readers more generally, and for artists even more generally. I am excited to see how this book is used in future art production and theorisation.

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Nicholas Cowley is a freelance academic living in Naarm.



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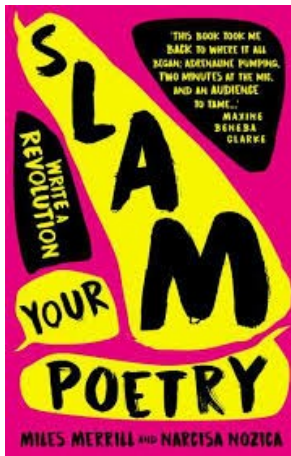
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Slam Poetry: You say you want a revolution?

review by Dominic Symes



Miles Merrill & Narcisa Nozica

Slam Your Poetry: Write a Revolution

NewSouth Publishing, Sydney NSW 2020

ISBN: 9781742236094

Pb 319pp AUD27.99

‘The Emerging Older Poets mentorship is designed to address the lack of opportunities in the 55+ age bracket,’ reports the Queensland Poetry Festival’s website. ‘So many great writers come to their craft later in life and create wonderfully rich and meaningful work as a result.’ In 2017 the Australian Poetry Slam was won by Solli Raphael, who was twelve at the time he delivered his poem ‘Australian Air’ to a packed Sydney Opera House. Both examples demonstrate the changing face of poetry in Australia. They highlight how the poetry mainstream, fed by universities and the well-worn tributaries of established

publication methods (magazines, journals and small presses), is being burst open by a flood of writers, young and old, who are writing from the margins. For those currently working in academia, it is vital to consider how the prevailing norms of who makes poetry and how poetry can be disseminated are being challenged by this new cohort of writers, many of whom are debuting their work at open mics and slams.

Australia is a more culturally diverse society than it was a generation ago when poetry was taught as ‘composition’ in universities, acting as an extension of an English literature curriculum. Slam Poetry has played a vital role in the most recent part of this expansion by targeting and removing barriers to participation to make poetry more accessible.

Understanding this shift makes Miles Merrill and Narcisa Nozica’s book, *Slam Your Poetry: Write A Revolution* a compelling survey of the first decade of slam’s existence in Australia. History tells us that any revolution worth fighting for seeks to flatten out entrenched hierarchies, and relies upon a ground-up movement of committed individuals who encourage ongoing collective action. By rejecting the academic pretensions of poetry written for the page (the type that is read out at ‘readings’), slams are welcoming to people from all backgrounds as they encourage poets to tell their stories rather than asking them to make informed references to previously existing work. Although the authors of this book are not seeking such a lineage, slams do add a new chapter to the radically egalitarian traditions of Australian performance poetry extending back at least as far as the 1960s, if not longer. It is worth mentioning that prototypes for an anti-establishment, performance-based poetics were present in works published by members of the ‘Generation of ‘68’¹ and in the ongoing work of *Collective Effort Press*, who from 1978 to 1983 published 925, a magazine of workers’ poetry, and who continue to publish *Unusual Work*, a ‘countercanonical’ journal in which ‘[r]adical politics’ and ‘radical formal experiment’ frequently converge (Carruthers 2017: np).

Where many other forms of poetry can be understood by their relationship to the canon (whether that be imitation of, elaboration on or pastiche of), slam directly and forcefully rejects the canon of page poetry taught at high school and university. At times, this can be a source of frustration for an institutionally trained poet when a poem performed at a slam seems to overlook an entire relevant body of work – for example, a slam poem about queer identity that would only be improved by its reader having read poets from the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School or the poets of the Mardi Gras resistance here in Australia – still, there is no question that much of that canon has been predominantly written by people bearing positions of privilege. That in itself is reason to look to the future rather than the past. It is exciting to see a movement in the process of creating its own heroes, reporting on its own success stories, and finding its own place amongst the landscape of poetry in Australia. That slam is unfolding as we speak, and that it is changing this landscape for the better, make this an important artform to contend with.

Like many other revolutionary movements, the blueprint has been transplanted from elsewhere. As recounted by Merrill, slam was initiated by Marc Kelly Smith in Chicago in the 1980s, where writers ached for an alternative to the self-indulgent and inherently exclusive poetry readings that were common at the time (2020: 8-9, 86). The effect this had on creating a ‘popular poetry’ was immediate (McGowan 2016: 69). A slam was a rejection of all of the common tropes of a page-poetry reading. Instead of reading for ten or twenty minutes each, poets would have 2 minutes to deliver their material. Instead of sitting down, poets would stand up and project their voices. Instead of being invited to read, poets would sign up at the beginning of the event. Instead of being judged (formally or informally) by established, older poets, poets would be judged by audience members, selected by various means of random assortment. In other words, ‘[i]t is not a shaking-piece-of-paper-in-hand, mumble-abstract-rhymes and look-at-the-floor-for-20-minutes poetry reading’ (1). This prevents the audience from becoming bored, it prevents the poet from being overly self-indulgent, it prevents the judges from pedalling a particular bias. As a way of encouraging poets who would have otherwise never imagined themselves *reading* their work in front of an audience to *perform* their work in an engaging and entertaining way, it is easy to see how such a movement could gain traction here in Australia.

‘Part how-to guide, part masterclass, part manifesto’, Merrill and Nozica’s book aims to help ‘students, teachers and wannabe poets of all ages join the spoken word revolution’ (np). From Merrill’s first section, which describes the how and why of slam poetry, into the second section written by Nozica, it is clear both authors see education at the forefront of the revolution. Merrill, as one of the earliest proponents of slam in Australia (indeed the founder of the Australian Poetry Slam) has cleverly teamed with Nozica, who is an award-winning educator, with experience of teaching slam poetry to children. For many of us the experience of being taught poetry in high school felt like partaking in an exercise determined to put students off ever reading poetry again, let alone writing it. Nozica and a new generation of English teachers are helping students to encounter poetry through performance rather than the page with great success.

As many of us working in the academy know, it can difficult to adequately teach and assess creative work: on the one hand, there are students who need a lot of coaxing to allow themselves be creative, and on the other hand there are those who need to be encouraged to pay more attention to the exercise and the prescribed texts; to stay on task, rather than following flights of imagination. Exercises informed by performance poetry and slam like those Merrill details for the individual poet in ‘Part 1: Write to Speak’ titled ‘Ten ideas to make your writing jump’ (23-72) and those which Nozica details for the classroom in ‘Part 3: Teach a Revolution’ called ‘Chapter 9: Awaken the artist within’ (226-284) are impressive for how they encourage writers to get words together quickly. They allow students to get words together within the space of a lesson and to perform those words in front of their peers within the same lesson. This is certainly a ground-breaking proposition

for anyone who has, like me, tried to encourage shy or otherwise reluctant students to engage passionately with poetry.

Nozica's sample lessons provide ways for teachers to encourage students to look within themselves and find experiences which were emotional in an effort to express these in such a way which retains and conveys as much of this emotion as possible. Where I have seen slam and performance poetry exercises overstep is by pressing inexperienced writers to bring their trauma to the surface in the hope that it will enable them to achieve a good grade for their assignment. One might argue the opacity and difficulty of page poetry provides armour against this potentially harmful exposure, but on the other hand this can make writers and their audiences feel distanced from the 'real' meaning of the work itself. What I found most useful was considering how poetry as performance borrows techniques and language from theatre. Merrill outlines some of these in 'Ten tricks to make your performance fly' (87-121). One of these was to play with Character and Voice (51-57), as in a drama class, students are encouraged not to rely wholly on pathos, but rather to engage with the entire spectrum of emotions; to adopt characters and voices in order to step outside of their own experiences, allowing them to imagine the experiences of others; to '[e]mpower others' (57). This sentiment though can be easily buried beneath the messages of encouragement for personal expression that Merrill and Nozica expound: 'You are there to express yourself', writes Merrill, 'it's all about you' (22). Perhaps relaxing the emphasis on personal expression is something which is more difficult for inexperienced poets to achieve at a slam when they have entered under their own name and are standing silently in front of a microphone and an expectant crowd, or when they are in a classroom with their peers as opposed to submitting a poem written on the page to be blind read for a journal or magazine, but nonetheless Merrill and Nozica are trying to encourage a kind of poetry that is fuelled by emotion aimed at eliciting strong emotions. This is poetry designed to 'change minds (a little bit)' (87).

On emotion, it is often the case that powerfully felt emotion can be used as a blunt instrument: a full stop which precludes comment or criticism of creative work. Nozica is aware of this fact when she discusses how to 'Fuel the writing process with feedback' (262-267). Poetry, as taught at university, is a technical skill which is learned in a workshop setting by following and building upon the examples of others. There are prescribed readings and grades are given based upon how well the student is able to comprehend these texts as evidenced in their own creative work. A portion of their grade will be given on how well they are able to reflect upon their work. Rather than being an anti-canonical revolution based upon expression and only expression, Nozica outlines a new canon of performance poetry and encourages the same technical focus as has been advocated in institutions for page poetry. Nozica's section of the book is a thorough guide for teachers in how to engage students in a love of poetry, not just the sound of their voice. It also gives poets who are

finding their voice the opportunity to develop and sharpen their skills for a lifetime of making poetry.

When it comes to using language creatively, there are many aspects of slam from which the academy could learn. Many page-poets like myself are guilty of the exact things which Merrill lambasts us for (the introspection, the opacity, the lack of vocal projection) and ideas in Part 1, whilst basic and aimed at an inexperienced reader, retain a lot of useful reminders about just how vital ideas like dialect, tense, perspective and metaphor can be when creating poetry. Similarly, the hierarchy of poetry in Australia that relies upon established journals and publishing houses seems clunky and outmoded when compared with the simple how-to, step-by-step guide set out in the second Merrill section of the book 'Part 2: Set up a slam' (145-165). What seemed so remarkably simple was encouraging participants to invest in the slam – literally, by paying for their participation – such that the audience gets to see more poets perform, there is a much greater chance of having a sizeable prize to give the winner and there is an element of the event which encourages rather than limits participation. As someone who runs a poetry reading myself, I especially loved the tips about how to use a microphone properly at a poetry reading (115-116) as a microphone giving its user 'feedback' is a sure-fire way to reduce the potency of the poet's performance. All poets could benefit from a quick guide to that particular piece of equipment. Equally, I was excited to have so many suggestions for new poets whose work I might be able to find on YouTube to share with a class. The most enjoyable part of reading this book was being granted access to a whole new canon of poets which I can incorporate into my own teaching.

It also made me interrogate a chip I had on my shoulder about slam as a genre, or a style of poetry rather than a poem or piece developed to be performed at an event. As Jakob Schweppenhäuser and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen write in 'Performing Poetry Slam', this is a common misnomer. 'We are here entering a complex terminological terrain', they write,

The term "poetry slam" refers to a *contest* in which performers of different kinds of oral poetry are competing; the term "slam poetry", on the contrary, refers to a certain kind of poetry that has emerged from these competitions. (2017: 66)

In the words of the late poet and activist Candy Royalle, whose contributions to the *Slam Your Poetry: Write a Revolution* include short insights contained in speech bubbles throughout the text: 'One thing I'd like to see change is the imitation of the American slam style, which has a very recognisable cadence and delivery style' (52). In my research on slam I came across 'Button Poetry', an American YouTube channel which would fit the above description, being a series of monologues, performed with a type of evangelical fervour that if the words were written down would retain about as much substance as the paper they were written on. Slam doesn't have to be like this, in fact, by definition it isn't,

and thankfully, most slam in Australia is far more engaging and formally interesting. It made me grateful that the advent of slam poetry in Australia has come at a time where as a society we seem less concerned than ever with the influence of American culture. As one example, *Fire Front: First Nations poetry and power today*, features a number of poems which would never have been intended for the page, written by performance poets like Steven Oliver, but in this collection they convey just as much power as those that were (Whittaker 2020).

The rewards for removing as many barriers as possible for entry into the world of poetry are enormous for establishing a more diverse and representative literary culture in Australia. As the Queensland Poetry Festival's brief for the Emerging Older Poets mentorship reflects, an emerging poet can come from anywhere: at any age, from any background and with any amount of experience. What Merrill and Nozica are doing in this book is mapping the territory and encouraging as many people as possible to take part. The book will serve well as a guide to creative writing teachers as an introduction to the field, how to encourage students to write for a slam, how to organise a slam, and finally, how best to incorporate these lessons into the classroom. Although the aims of slam appear outside of the academy, as more slam poets gain mainstream success, these poets will find themselves brought into the academy. Students will know the work of slam poets once they enter creative writing classes at university and will look for it amongst the poetry they are being taught. It is incumbent upon creative writing academics to expand their reading lists to include poets who compose for the stage as well as the page, and to do so with the rigour and technical focus that both print and performance demand.

Notes

¹ As Fiona Elizabeth Allen Scotney notes, the 'generation of '68' describes an assortment of 'mainly young writers who first came to prominence in the closing years of the 1960s... They rose to public notice on the crest of a wave of poetry readings, 'underground' magazines, and a generally expressed antagonism to the established mainstream of poetry at that time, which they saw as too conservative. The readings attracted a large and varied audience, and the magazines, being cheap and open to almost anything in the way of new poetry, were an ideal breeding ground for ideas, argument and experiment' (2014: x).

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Dominic Symes is a writer living on Kaurna Country (Adelaide). His poetry has featured in Australian Poetry Journal, Australian Book Review, Transnational Literature and Award Winning Australian Writing. He curates NO WAVE, a monthly poetry reading series. He was selected for Cordite/Australian Poetry's 'Tell me like you mean it' anthology and appeared at the Emerging Writers Festival in 2020. His reviews and criticism have appeared in Cordite Poetry Review, Axon: Creative Explorations and TEXT Journal. He has recently taken on the role of co-editor for reviews at TEXT Journal.



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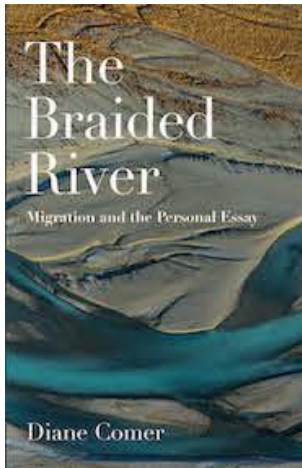
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Braiding lives and lines

review by Jessica White



Diane Comer

The Braided River: Migration and the Personal Essay

Otago University Press, Dunedin 2019

ISBN 9781988531533

Pb 304pp AUD35.00

Diane Comer describes herself as someone who had ‘always been leaving home’ (14). Born in Italy and raised in the Dominican Republic, Belgium and the United States, she grew into an adult who moved between Sweden, the United States and New Zealand. As someone who had to repeatedly adjust to new people, places and cultures, her constant uprooting, she writes, ‘instilled in me a restless quest for where I belong’ (39) and she found that ‘the one place where I could ground my sense of displacement was in writing’ (14). Drawing on her

experiences, Comer developed a community education course that invited migrants to explore and reflect on their circumstances through the form of the personal essay. The inexpensive course attracted migrants from their twenties to their eighties and ranged from doctors and lawyers to people who had left school at age sixteen. *The Braided River* is the distillation of the experiences and thoughts of 37 migrants who between them wrote over two hundred essays.

The book's great strength lies in Comer's discussion of the ways in which the personal essay lends itself to an exploration of migration. French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) inaugurated the form, using it to explore the question *Que sais-je?* Or, 'What do I know?' Comer refers to life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's definition of the personal essay as a 'mode of writing that is literally a self-trying-out ... a testing ("assay") of one's own intellectual, emotional and physiological responses to a given topic' (160), in this case, migration. The book's introduction and six chapters, while covering different facets of the migrant experience, canvas four recurring motifs that find expression in the personal essay: the braided river, the stranger who comes to town, the backward and forward nature of time, and language.

Comer uses the geographical feature of a braided river as a metaphor for an essay's style, and refers to this metaphor in her introduction, 'The Headwaters of the River,' and first two chapters. Citing *Braided River Ecology*, she defines the braided river as consisting of 'much more than active surface channels ... the river flows across an alluvial gravel bed, which may be many metres deep and possibly kilometres wide' (13). Like the braided rivers that flow across the country of Aotearoa New Zealand, Comer writes:

much of what migrants discover and learn about their new country lies well below the surface narratives and remains unstudied from their own reflective and analytical perspectives. The forces that determine migration and how individuals react to and potentially write about it have an interwoven external narrative and a deep, wide undercurrent that carries the story towards its conclusion. (13)

The genre of the personal essay, she continues, 'provides a method of enquiry well suited to plumbing the more resonant depths of migrants' knowledge and experience and gives a more nuanced understanding of the existential landscape of migration' (13). Continuing the metaphor, she explains how the braided rivers originate in New Zealand's mountains and trickle under rocks until they become visible. Similarly, 'the story of migration begins long before a migrant arrives in a new country' (28).

In Chapter One, 'Roots – The River Under the River', Comer explores what motivates migrants to leave their homes. Sometimes this is restlessness, and at other times it is an imperative to accompany partners and families. While these migrants' 'surface narrative'

might tell one story of leaving and moving to another country, ‘the depths reveal where the story – the journey – began’ (39). Comer returns to this idea of an origin and a journey in Chapter Two, ‘Routes – Writing Between Two Shores,’ when she refers to the original migrants to New Zealand, the Māori people, who voyaged to an unknown country and brought their culture with them. They named the braided rivers from which Comer takes inspiration – the Rakaia, the Hurunui, the Waimakariri, the Waitaki.

In this chapter, Comer draws on Helene Cixous’s observation that ‘writing forms a passageway between two shores’, explaining how ‘every migrant crosses both a literal and an existential shore, and the personal essay acts as a passageway between the two, a route to where self meets world and self meets other’ (90). The self also meets the reader, and this makes the personal essay a useful vehicle for documenting a life which ‘even the migrant’s own family may never see or share’ (141) as Comer explains in Chapter Three, ‘Closing the Distance’. As well as helping to bridge a physical distance, the personal essay helps migrants to work through their responses to the effect of distance, which can also include temporal or emotional distance. On a wider level, again, the personal essay can show ‘what the world looks like from the vantage point of the stranger who comes to town’ (22). In crossing from one shore to another, the stranger, in their writing of the personal essay, captures multiple perspectives: ‘an awareness of past and present, foreign and familiar, near and distant’ (22).

Not only does the capacious form of the personal essay allow the writer to capture these various strands, it also offers them a vantage point from which they can reflect on what has happened in their past, and where they are heading. As Comer explains, ‘the moment we sit down to write, we begin to remember and to forge connections between our past and present selves’ (111). For migrants, this helps them to contemplate routes taken or not taken, and such reflection ‘has immense value for migrants who have left an entire world behind and forged a life elsewhere’ (110).

Language plays a significant role in learning about and accessing a new culture. It is ‘the river that runs through and braids everything together, the life blood of culture and connection, contact and communication’ (25). Without language, as Comer discovers when her family moved to Sweden from New Zealand following the Christchurch earthquake, it is very difficult to communicate and feel accepted. This explains why writing – both in the personal essay and in Comer’s classes – was so important to her and her students. As she describes in Chapter Four, ‘The Second Cup of Tea – On Belonging’, in their essays and writing classes, her students ‘developed and shared an understanding, a space that sometimes even those closes to them had been unable to provide’ (170).

Migration was difficult for Comer and many of her students not just in terms of accessing new languages and customs, but also in terms of a longing for what was left behind. This is

another reason why, as Comer outlines in Chapter Five, ‘The Migration of Identity’, the personal essay’s ‘penchant for holding contrary and conflicted emotions and thoughts is ideally suited to what migrants themselves experience in their divided loyalties between people and place’ (214). It is clear that the form can be matched to the migrant experience in numerous, valuable ways.

This book is an engaging and enjoyable read, with a vast range of examples of how migration to New Zealand is encountered and expressed, and the personal essay is clearly shown to be a beneficial technique for narrating various facets of migration. The book progresses according to these facets, rather than the different elements of the personal essay itself, reflecting its emphasis on writing as a tool of reflection and support, rather than craft. The references to the braided river as a metaphor are not sustained after Chapter Two, and Comer’s mentions of the personal essay itself also taper off in the latter chapters. When she does refer to the mode, it is to reiterate earlier information and motifs. For this reason, the work might have been crisper and more concise. I also query Comer’s references to the ‘contact zone’, a term coined by postcolonial studies scholar Mary Louise Pratt (whom Comer cites), in the context of migrants who grapple with unequal power relations in a new place, but without contemplating the ongoing effects of colonisation on the Māori people.

These qualms aside, *The Braided River* has undeniable sociological insights. As Comer notes in her final chapter, ‘The Gift of Return’, other critical lenses such as oral histories and interviews (and, I assume, data collection such as the New Zealand census), do not provide ‘the drive toward the reflective self-inquiry of the personal essay’ (238), and as such they cannot capture the emotional labour of relocation and adjustment. The essay, by contrast, represents stories of cultural movement not only in the form itself, but also in its etymological root: *assay*, or ‘to try’. As Comer writes, ‘migrants possess an affinity for the genre whose hallmark is to try, to weigh and to test, even as migrants have been tried, weighed tested and been tested by their chosen country’ (12).

I began this review on the other side of the world in Munich, Germany, with Covid-19 closing in. I finished it in Brisbane after a fraught journey home, relieved to be back with my partner in a familiar environment. My experiences are a timely reminder to me of Comer’s observations that, when all is uncertain, writing can ground us in the world.

Jessica White is the author of the award-winning A Curious Intimacy (Penguin 2007) and Entitlement (Penguin 2012), and a hybrid memoir about deafness, Hearing Maud (UWA Publishing, 2019), which won the 2020 Michael Crouch Award for a debut work of biography. Jessica’s short stories and essays have appeared widely in Australian and international literary journals and have been shortlisted or longlisted for major prizes. Jessica is the recipient of funding from Arts Queensland and the Australia Council for the Arts and has undertaken residencies and fellowships in Hobart, Rome and Munich. She currently lectures at the University of Queensland where she is

writing an ecobiography of Western Australia's first non-Indigenous female scientist, 19th century botanist Georgiana Molloy. Jessica can be found at www.jessicawhite.com.au



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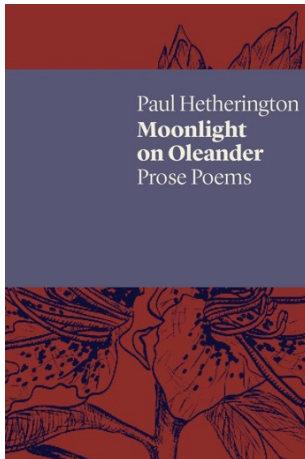
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Prose poem masterclass

review by Mags Webster



Paul Hetherington

Moonlight on Oleander: Prose Poems

UWA Publishing Perth WA 2018

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Pb 128pp AUD22.99

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, two expert practitioners and theorists of ‘the monster child’ (Simic in Zawaki 2000: 300) that is prose poetry, note in a co-authored paper that ‘prose poems frequently open up, TARDIS-like, to reveal much more than their actual size on the page would appear to allow’ (Hetherington & Atherton 2015: 275).

Certainly, in Hetherington’s latest collection *Moonlight on Oleander*, ‘the small grows large in the gaze’ (26). Presented in eight sections, it offers a masterclass in the art, versatility and intricacies of this intense and rewarding form.

As if reinforcing the notion of prose poetry's TARDIS-like time and dimension defying attributes, the first section, 'Fenestrations', whisks the reader into various 'calligraphies of distance' (14). As Hetherington notes in the book's Preface (11), prose poetry is a way of containing and expressing the 'mutability of our understandings of space and time' (11). Accordingly, we travel geographically from Washington DC to Japan, Ireland, and Europe; and mythically, into the Odyssey, transposed to the flight cabin of a modern aircraft ('Mythologies' 33), with flight attendant Helen as the face that served a thousand coffees.

The prose poem is an excellent form of time travel.

In 'Body and Tongue', the second section, Hetherington's poetic prose turns sensuous: 'as he smoked bees he thought of soft down on his wife's back ... of night's yellow and black caress' (37). These are poems of muscle and skin: they rub up against experience: 'peeling an existence is easier than it looks ... your situation will mostly be imperfect and at first you'll find yourself itching where the new life hasn't taken' (39); against romantic longing: 'the unavailable outweighs what's possessed' (41); against discovery: 'they held each other at slow arm's length in the morning's indistinct light' (43); and rediscovery: 'semi-conscious you leaned against me and I remembered your weight, a few weeks old in my free left hand' (42). Their fascia is language: promises, accents, 'a poem being endlessly made' (41), 'gestures sutured by words' (45), sentences, 'an unknowable verb' (50).

The prose poem is an excellent form of seduction.

Clues to the theme of the third section, 'Unhooking', can be found right at the beginning: 'I'm making a shrine to the fragment' (52). For fragments read moments, flashbacks, objects and memories. In 'Archive' (61), for instance, a deceased soldier's life is summed up by the detritus he leaves behind, including 'a drawing of a Chinese temple bell; twelve pairs of pinch-nose pliers; three shrivelled bats' wings' (60). A sweater's seam unravelling green thread triggers a recall of 'two leaves ... dried in a notebook ... three of them in a hedgerowed lane in Devon, a bicycle flashing past' (62). A child enters the unsettlingly surreal environment of a delicatessen, which has 'a smell like a complex idea' (55): neither identifiable nor articulable. Amid the 'constellation of cheeses' (55) and intestinal sausage coils 'someone takes his hand and a man jollies his head' (55).

The prose poem is an excellent form of specificity.

Thematic hints are also there at the beginning of the next section, 'Inchings and Belongings'. 'The Room Beyond Rooms' (68) – the title a clever play on the prose poem's distinctive difference to conventional poetry's stanzaic form – could be read as the definition of what a prose poem is and does:

Sometimes it opens at the end of a circular staircase; at other times it's small and spare,

smelling of plum cake and cumquat liqueur spilled on linoleum. Occasionally it has ornate furniture and half-pulled velvet drapes ... [s]ometimes the room is an elongated attic. There are dark floorboards; surreptitious light squeezes through shutters. (68)

This section is populated by ‘rooms’, literal and figurative, marked out by measurements of time: ‘the angular gestures of a clock’s hands’ (72), and ‘[t]he heart’s small murmur’ (71). They are rooms which, as the poems’ speakers discover, are difficult to quit; yet Hetherington’s virtuosity lulls so that the reader, too, learns to accommodate ‘the lie of a concave sofa’ (74). These are poems suffused with a strange glamour and languor, like a *haute couture* photo shoot in a ravaged outback hotel: even when rain clatters ‘like thrown nails’ or plaster peels ‘like worn bandages’ against backdrops of riots, and streets ‘haloed in night light and anger’ there is some unexpected, unusual detail that redresses balance, that won’t allow claustrophobia to win: ‘a head of purplish broccoli ... beauty that sits in the hand’ (74); ‘a stadium’s bowl plumped with fruits of light’ (76); the exuberance and indomitability of ‘wild parsley’ (77).

The prose poem is an excellent form of accommodation.

Sheets, skies, hands, ice, photo albums, mirrors, buildings, family myths... and the page itself, which ghosts hold ‘in the form of a family... [m]ysterious forms have begun to own them’ (82). These are some of the ‘Memory Fields’ of section four, upon which experience and remembrance is inscribed. Language burrows into us: Alice-like, ‘we follow sentences as they speak in brown chthonic tones, rubbing our faces with childhood’ (85), and ‘we look for ourselves in opaque lids of ice’ (87) as we crackle across frost. Yet do we recall with any accuracy? Judging from the final poem in this section, ‘Red Wine’, it is clear that we sculpt our recollections to fit a personal need: ‘although memory claims she leant forwards to kiss, she denied it, saying she had a sudden crick in her neck. He remembers his lips missing hers and the waiter pausing’ (89).

The prose poem is an excellent form for dissembling.

‘If music and neat gin won’t invite sleep in, then it’s hours staring at the twisted blades of the ceiling fan’ (96) says the speaker of the poem sequence that comprises section four, ‘Insomnia’ (94). A prose poem’s an excellent form for looking at – and writing about – a problem from several angles. Read ‘Insomnia’ when ‘the numbers on your clock scroll and you’re learning to count again. It’s not sheep – it’s words’ (96). You will feel less alone, and it will also serve as an excellent entrée to the penultimate section, ‘Moonlight on Oleander’, where the night – populated by worms, water, soil, moon and the toxic oleander – seems to be simultaneously setting and muse. ‘Don’t write about this, you said, and I agreed that I wouldn’t. You will, you said, and I agreed that I must’ (99). This section synthesises elements we have already encountered, such as rooms, memory, language – ‘clots of nouns and writhing, soiled verbs’ – and the translation of eros and of limerence

into words: 'He wants her poems. Not those in her book, or those that came by email, but words elicited by touch – ' (103).

A prose poem's an *excellent* form.

The final poems within the collection, gathered in 'Blue Square and Black Page', are valedictory in tone, and, as the title intimates, draw heavily on ekphrasis. Death is now an occupant of these poem/rooms, which are 'disarticulating' (119) and shrinking to hospital beds, picture frames, to an urn from which a parent's ashes are dispersed. In 'Elegy' (123), memorialising a father's death, 'a painted blue square luminesces and duplicates' (124) (perhaps through the speaker's tears?). The speaker sees the painting as a proxy for their father, and searches futilely for a sign or response: 'twelve times I have returned but it hasn't released its sound... I would speak with it but what could I say when its word is still about-to-be' (124). One senses, however, that the speaker already knows what the painting is articulating: the blunt and unassuageable ache of '[u]nsayable love' (115).

While the arc of *Moonlight on Oleander* started with 'Ascension' (14) and the view from the plane as it approached Washington DC, it ends in contemplation of the descent towards the inevitable black page. Language, however, will have the last word, with Hetherington concluding this remarkable, fierce, yet incredibly tender collection with mention of 'a lately scrawled manuscript' and the anticipatory action of the roller on the empty printer's plate. A prose poem's an excellent life form.

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Mags Webster is completing a PhD at Murdoch University. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing (City University of Hong Kong), a BA in English and Creative Writing (Murdoch University) and BA (Hons) in English and Drama (University of Kent). Her first poetry collection The Weather of Tongues (Sunline Press) won Australia's Anne Elder Award. Her next collection, Nothing to Declare, is published by Puncher & Wattman.



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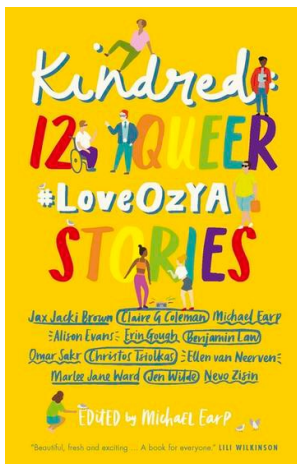
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Queer visibility and belonging in YA

review by Chloe Cannell



Michael Earp (ed)

Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories

Walker Books, Newtown NSW 2019

ISBN: 9781760651039

Pb 320pp AUD24.99

Acknowledgement: this review was written on the lands of the Kaurana people. I pay respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially Elders, past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

‘Queer isn’t just a sexuality. It’s a fundamental viewpoint and different way of looking at the world.’ (283)

Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories, edited by Michael Earp, is a landmark collection of Young Adult (henceforth YA) short stories from established and emerging authors in Australia. The quote above from Benjamin Law reflects the shared and diverse experiences and voices from the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, plus) community offered in the stories of this collection that unites these authors, this community and these stories beyond markers of identity. Sexuality and gender are the overarching link of these stories but, as the title suggests, kindred is the real theme as connections form and fracture between characters, whether they be romantic, sexual, familiar, friendship or platonic.

Many authors in the collection refer to or explore gender diversity and gender-neutral language in their stories. The use of pronouns is normalised in introductions between characters such as in Jax Jacki Brown's 'I Like Your Rotation'. In Jem Wilde's 'Waiting' characters wear badges with pronouns displayed on them and in Marlee Jane Ward's 'Rats' a side character is referred to with they and them pronouns. In Alison Evans's 'Stormlines', main non-binary characters Marling and New use gender neutral pronouns and later on Evans demonstrates how to correct pronouns in an interaction between Ver, New and another character Peony. Claire G Coleman offers a world where all gender is neutral in 'Sweet'. The story's namesake character Sweet discloses she is 'gendered' (125), 'to be precise, I am a woman, female' (126). The protagonist Roxy confronts their own gaps in knowledge thinking 'I was not sure what a gendered person was, had only heard rumours and dirty jokes about the gendered before' (127).

While it is great to see positive or neutral understandings of gender in these stories, Nevo Zisin's 'Light Bulb' and Omar Sakr's 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' demonstrate misunderstandings based upon discrimination regarding gender and its connection to sexuality. The protagonist in 'Light Bulb' is bullied by their peers and called the gay f slur. They are confused by people's coding of their gender for arbitrary reasons, for example 'Cross my legs = girls, spread them out = boy' (148). Similarly, in 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' Sakr shows how gender is frequently misperceived within the scope of heteronormativity. The protagonist Wafat is fearful of being viewed as feminine because his peers say his parents gave him a 'girl's name' (227). For this reason he felt that 'any kind of attention was dangerous' (233).

The stories in this collection present a range of coming of age narratives for its sexually diverse protagonists. One of the few characters in the collection to explicitly label their sexual identity is Audrey in 'Waiting' who states, 'I'm very bi' (160) to her new queer friends. Audrey's relaxed introduction of her bisexual identity, along with the other stories in this collection, challenges coming out narratives that conceive this process as the only storylines available to LGBTQIA+ characters (Henderson 2020). But Audrey's brief, 'coming out' experience with her new queer friends also helps young readers see how a

positive, single event shapes Audrey as a character, much like how these experiences, however brief or intense, shape an individual's experience in real life. The collection goes on to complicate traditional, often Western (Sanchez 2017), understandings of coming out in 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' where Wafat is fearful of his attraction to Noah being discovered by anyone he knows. The use of derogatory language in the story reinforces the shame around his sexuality and its ties to faith. Law's 'Questions to Ask Straight Relatives' explores his personal experiences of being a gay man and confronting his own prejudices and internalised homophobia about 'That kind of gay' (280) referring to gay men with high-pitched voices often associated with female. Some authors in the collection play with romance fiction tropes, such as the queering of meet-cutes in Ward's 'Rats' and Erin Gough's 'In Case of Emergency, Break Glass' where protagonists first meet their romantic interests in unusual circumstances, like behind curtains at catered private parties and crashing into them with bikes. This collection resists a singular narrative for queer young people.

Family is represented in these stories not only as a legal or biological relationship but found family with trusted friends. In 'Rats', 'Sweet', 'Waiting', 'Each City' and 'Stormlines' the characters all have communities or kinship with friends. The stories promote loyalty and compassion based on unconditional love and support rather than familial obligation. For example, in 'Waiting' Audrey forms friendships with fellow queer fan kids and thinks 'I am welcome here' (170). The stories with families reject the YA trope of either absent or completely supportive parents by treating parents with as equal nuance as the teenage characters, like the fathers in 'Light Bulb' and 'I Like Your Rotation'. Both stories present supportive fathers who express their love and try to understand their child's experiences, even if they do not know their child's sexuality or gender identity. Law's story recounts his personal experiences with coming out in his family along with the cultural, generational and language barriers for older family members. On the other hand, 'Laura Nyro at the Wedding' and 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' delve into more complex notions of family who may be, or may not be, deserving of constant presence in the protagonists' lives. Protagonist Jack, in 'Laura Nyro at the Wedding', has a tense relationship with his parents and sister because of the shared trauma of the devastating impact of his father's predatory behaviour had on their family, especially the suicide of his brother. Jack often unfairly compares himself to other families like his partner's loving immigrant family. For Wafat in 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool', he fears rejection after his parents abandoned him, and hiding his sexuality makes him feel like more of an outsider to the adults around him that make up his family, regardless of legal or biological relation. He wishes for 'a home that didn't resent him' (244). Most of the stories are a reminder of the importance of family, especially found family, for LGBTQIA+ young people.

The authors in *Kindred* have answered the call for more genre fiction featuring sexually and gender diverse characters for young people. This ranges from fantastical elements in Earp's

historical ‘Bitter Draught’, to a future drowned world in Evans’s ‘Stormlines’, as well as the psychological horror in Zisin’s ‘Light Bulb’, the contemporary realism like Brown’s ‘I Like Your Rotation’, and Law’s creative nonfiction ‘Questions to Ask Straight Relatives’. Ellen van Neerven, Ward and Coleman’s dystopian future stories ‘Each City’, ‘Rats’ and ‘Sweet’, respectively, complicate notions of power as the protagonists reject and evade authorities. Additionally, ‘Each City’ recognises Aboriginal activism by standing up to oppressive governments attempting to silencing their voices, beliefs and culture.

In addition to numerous genres, this anthology also adeptly explores adversity without it being a defining characteristic of queer lives. The stories deal with a range of issues including fandoms, toxic friendship, activism, disability pride, mental illness, unrequited love, sexual desire and more. Most of the stories are suitable for all high schoolers but overall the collection is best for 15 and above. If anything, Christos Tsiolkas’ ‘Laura Nyro at the Wedding’ is out of place in the collection because the twenty-something protagonist sympathises his father who is guilty of statutory rape. While the story is great at exploring the collection’s overarching theme of connection, the age of the main characters and difficult subject matters of ephebophilia, suicide, and tense couple and family conversations, could be distressing for readers and may be more suitable for New Adult [1] fiction than Young Adult. The anthology is bookended with Law’s ‘Questions to Ask Straight Relatives’ which is full of the quotes many rainbow young people, and older, will commit to memory. His story is a reminder of the possibilities of queerness and to question norms. He says,

Most of us take for granted that the world is supposed to operate in a certain way, and that things that are “typical” somehow equate to “good” or “normal”. Sometimes though it’s healthy to make the brain perform the mental gymnastics it needs to when simply asked, again and again, but-why, but-why, but-why. (279)

As Editor, Earp showcases his passion and expertise on YA and queer writing by curating twelve stories that beautifully speak to queer experiences. This anthology offers all readers, but particularly queer readers, the chance to see worlds that mirror their own and the opportunity to step into other worlds. The book also offers resources for queer teens which alongside these stories may be life saving for rainbow young people. Like how the first #LoveOzYA anthology *Begin, End, Begin* (Binks 2017) led to this queer anthology, I hope there will be more anthologies to follow showcasing more Australian YA authors as well as inspire readers to read more queer stories from the authors in this anthology.

Notes

[1] New Adult is a term for the literary category between Young Adult and Adult literature with protagonists aged 18 to 25 (Pattee 2017).

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Chloe Cannell is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include young adult literature, diversity in storytelling and queer writing. Since 2018 she has worked on the organising committee for the South Australian Gender, Sex and Sexualities Postgraduate and ECR Conference. Her research writing has been published in Writing From Below.



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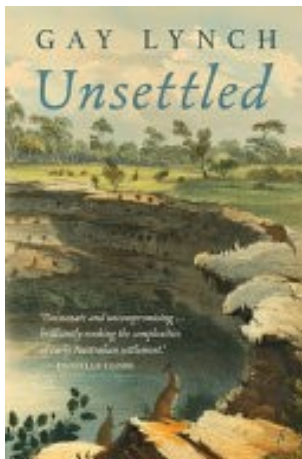
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Unsettling histories of the Irish in Australia

review by Brigid Magner



Gay Lynch

Unsettled

Ligature, Balmain NSW 2019

ISBN 978-1-925883-23-7

Pb 428pp AUD34.99

Unsettled is an Irish settler-colonial novel which follows a family from Galway to South Australia in the 1850s. Author Gay Lynch is preoccupied with the psychological baggage and apocryphal stories carried by these Galway Lynches to Booandik country, near modern-day Mount Gambier.

Lynch is an associate in Creative Writing and English at Flinders University whose first novel, *Cleanskin*, was published in 2005. *Unsettled* derived from her PhD, which was

awarded in 2008. Lynch's PhD also generated a scholarly monograph, *Apocryphal and Literary Influences on Galway Diasporic History* (2010). 'Apocryphal stories' Lynch argues, 'attract creative writers like me who want to dig up stories that already exist, like turf; then we watch them flare, creating new truths out of possible lies' (115).

The novel's protagonist, Rosanna, comes from a busy, overcrowded Irish household near Gambierton, described as: 'two wattle and daubed rooms lined and pegged with bullock hides, a thatched roof and a stone chimney, box furniture wobbling on an earthen floor' (8). With her mother, Rosanna shares the burden of looking after a large family, including an ailing baby. She seeks escape from this environment with her Booandik friend Moorecke. Even though Irish Catholics were themselves marginalised by the English, they were white settlers on unceded land nevertheless. They were not in the same position of Indigenous peoples they encountered. Nevertheless, Rosanna's kinship with Moorecke allows Lynch to explore the progressive dispossession of Booandik people during this period.

In fact, Moorecke is an almost constant presence in Rosanna's mind. The novel begins with Rosanna worrying about the turn in the weather and the consequences for her friend's wellbeing: 'If Rosanna has a winter cough, Moorecke's must be worse and dangerous for a *Booandik*' (1).

Their relationship has changed since Moorecke's marriage to an older man and the loss of her young child. This leaves Rosanna feeling nostalgic for this early intimacy:

How long has it been since Rosanna woke in full moonlight to the whump of possum-skin drums, the tapping of sticks, the rise and fall of singing? Once, smelling roasting bustard, she had crept between the trees and hunkered down at. Distance to watch Moorecke seated with young women at the *murpenas*. Why had she not been paired with one of the *moorongal-ngara* who stamped a half-second behind the beat through the camp dust round the fire, spears quivering at their young shoulders, goanna fat and ochre glistening on their skin? (11)

Due to her formative association with Moorecke, Rosanna is hyper-aware of threats to the Booandik people by the encroachment of farmers. She notices that many of them had disappeared in the years since the Lynches arrived from Ireland.

The settlers increasingly find minor excuses to drive them further away. The first chapter opens with the death of a bullock belonging to a local farmer with a spear in its neck. Rosanna's first thought is whether it's been killed by Moorecke, causing her anxiety because she knows the power of their neighbour William Ashby only too well. When Moorecke later borrows a special dress from Rosanna's employer Mrs Ashby's wife, it threatens to trigger off a violent skirmish.

As Frances Devlin-Glass argues in *Tinteán*, Rosanna fits to a tee the prototypical ‘new Australian girl’, anti-imperial and anti-feminine, which became popular in the character of Miles Franklin’s Sybylla and in the young adult novels of Mary Grant Bruce (Devlin Glass 2020). Like Sybylla, Rosanna is frustrated by the limited roles she is allotted, as a carer to siblings and as a poorly paid servant to Mrs Ashby. She is a talented horse racer, but her prowess goes unrecognised while her brother Edwin’s achievements are celebrated, despite his compulsive gambling and dubious dealings.

Edward Geoghegan’s historical play, *The Hibernian Father* (1840) is used intertextually as device to offer an artistic diversion for Rosanna, and indirectly to her sensitive brother Skelly who also reads it. Geoghegan is known for writing the first tragedy for the Sydney stage. His obituary records that he ‘was a dramatic author of no mean order, and his pen has contributed considerably to the scanty stock of genuine colonial dramatic literature’ (Obituaries Australia 2010-2020). The main character in *The Hibernian Father* is a father who, as Galway mayor, feels obliged to execute his own son for allegedly murdering a Spanish rival in love.

Lynch draws attention to the archetypal aspect of the tension between fathers and sons, particularly the tale of Cuchulainn killing his son in the stories of the Ulster mythological cycle. In *Unsettled*, the eldest son Edwin is judged to be a criminal, but the family denies this dark tradition and chooses to support him. Meanwhile Rosanna and Skelly are less favoured and struggle to find independence from the homestead, without the advantages Edwin enjoys.

Rosanna becomes aware of the Galway story when the visiting actor George Sutherland first tells her about Geoghegan’s play, leading to readings and frankly described erotic encounters in the Ashby’s barn. George later drowns in the wreck of the *Admella* which Gordon eulogised, rather inaccurately, in his poem ‘From the Wreck’. This tragedy, and Gordon’s title, recently reappeared with the publication of Jane Rawson’s speculative novel *From the Wreck* (2017).

Rosanna, who has a talent for witnessing inauspicious events, watches the foundering ship from the shore:

Appalling enough to see a vessel, mostly obscured by the rising swell, and so stricken upon the reef that the mast and sail have been ripped asunder; but, most distressing of all, a man runs along the deck, his hands thrown in the air in wild gesticulation (260).

This tragedy has a counterpoint in the betrayal of Skelly at a Catholic monastery. After being recommended by Father Tennison Woods, a family friend and associate of Gordon’s,

Skelly joins this Monastery to study etymology. Its large collection of specimens provides a pretext for a monstrous priest to violently assault him. Skelly's haemophilia, figured as a pathological sign of Irish predispositions, proves ultimately fatal.

The poor luck of Rosanna's family brings to mind the suffering of the Finch family in Lucy Treloar's *Salt Creek* (2015) set in the Coorong (Kurangk) region. Like Lynch, Treloar drew on family history as well as detailed place-based research for her novel. Peter Pierce observes that Treloar took her portrait of the Finch patriarch from prominent South Australian John Barton Hack who had many failed schemes and misadventures (Pierce 2015).

Rosanna's family, while far from perfect, is far more anti-authoritarian and rebellious than the downcast Finchs. Her parents are not stereotypical 19th century elders, who fail to forgive their son when he commits a crime. Her mother Eilish, while grief stricken by the death of a baby, does not conform to the cliché of the martyred mother. She has an unschooled intellect and fighting spirit like Rosanna herself. Like Hester Finch who worships *Jane Eyre*, Rosanna has encounters with literary culture which open up new horizons. Gordon, who recurs throughout the narrative, is depicted as an aloof, distant figure with a refrigerated manner who mutters to himself while riding which accords with many extant descriptions of him.

Rosanna catches the eye of Gordon, who made no secret of his interest in good-looking girls in real life. he wrote to his friend Charley Walker about a pretty woman, 'I certainly tried it on strong but without success; not that I meant Matrimony' (Lynch 2010: 193). In Lynch's novel, Gordon flirts with Rosanna but she is preoccupied with George the married actor.

After riding her family's champion horse Lucifer all the way to Melbourne, Rosanna embeds herself in the theatrical environment that her dead lover George once inhabited. This brings her back into Gordon's orbit, if briefly. Lynch contrives an improbable meeting between them at Brighton beach, shortly before his death by suicide. Gordon is a diminished figure, who complains of headaches derived from riding accidents: 'My constant companion, pain.' (386) Rosanna thinks that the 'inside of his head is likely scrambled, the result of falling from horseback.' (386) Thinking about Gordon's legacy, Rosanna worries that her own story will not be remembered. (386) Notwithstanding her evident bravery and passion, it's likely she will leave little trace in historical records.

Lynch observes that this book was originally prompted by a desire to reinscribe Lynch women in history, to imagine their hidden back-stories and analyse their lack of agency in family narratives. In her PhD research, she sought to understand why girls disappear from many family stories, right up to the present time, and how representations of Irish girls and their sexuality can be contested.

In her published PhD, *Apocryphal and Literary Influences*, Lynch asks: ‘As a creative writer, teacher and researcher, rather than the family genealogist, what do I owe the living and what do I owe the dead?’ (140). She argues that she has attempted to unify Lynch stories, particularly the apocryphal, and offer an alternative history. *Unsettled* operates on the level of the family but it also makes multiple offerings Australian literary culture. Firstly, it’s a contribution to the literature of South Australia. Secondly, it’s reminiscent of Australian pioneer sagas by Nancy Cato and Eleanor Dark that explore the experiences of female settlers in challenging environments. Yet Lynch extends the range of the female characters in these sagas, endowing Rosanna with a lively erotic life and sense of agency that is unusual in earlier texts. Finally, Dianne Hall suggests that we might be able talk of a discrete tradition of Irish-Australian literature, running from Frank the Poet, via Joseph Furphy to Vincent Buckley, Tom Kenneally, and Thea Astley (Hall 2020). While challenging certain aspects of Irish settler culture, Lynch should surely be counted among these illustrious predecessors.

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Brigid Magner is a Senior Lecturer and founding member of the non/fictionLab at RMIT University. Her monograph Locating Australian Literary Memory was published by Anthem Press in 2019.



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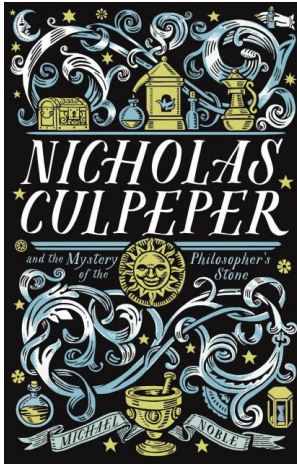
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Moral magic and medieval medicine

review by Christopher Gist



Michael Noble

Nicholas Culpeper and the Mystery of the Philosopher's Stone

Buon-Cattivi Press, Adelaide SA 2019

ISBN 9781922314000

Pb 270 pp AUD29.95

““History has no libretto...” Alexander Herzen said, “...so why should an ordinary life?”” Isaiah Berlin asked (in an era when PPE meant philosophy, politics, and economics). This work of historical fiction by Dr Michael Noble examines real-life 17th century apothecary and alchemist Nicholas Culpeper who lived during one of England’s many turbulent times. Described by the publishers as an ‘enthraling novella’, the book is full of the recondite, the quaint, and the intriguing, but exactly how it resolves the tensions of unshaped history with the imperatives of narrative fiction is central to whether this is indeed a novel(la) or not.

The book was published posthumously and formed part of Noble's PhD studies at the University of South Australia. Noble was prominent in intersex activism, reportedly having struggled for years with varieties of less-than-successful medical interventions for his Klinefelter's Syndrome.

Insolubility nips at the heels of the novel's protagonist, too. Apothecary Zacharia Jenkins is hired by Culpeper's uncle Sir William after Culpeper's death to search for proof of Culpeper's 'aurum potabile', a medical manifestation of the so-called 'philosopher's stone', a substance that turns base metals into more precious varieties such as silver or gold. We are told that aurum potabile 'cures all ailments and extends one's life' (126), and several dubious characters in the story claim that Culpeper included the secret to this 'drinkable gold' in his writings. If Zacharia can verify both the existence and reliability of Culpeper's work on aurum potabile, then Sir William stands to profit while, at the same time, rescue nephew Nicholas's reputation from its current uneven standing.

I write this review in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis and at the time of Melbourne's first curfew as a consequence of the increasing number of Covid-19 illnesses and deaths, a disease that is embroiling medical workers in PPE disputes and igniting the most focused hunt for a solution the world has seen. The stakes are profound.

In Noble's work the scholarship is clear, the end notes and references erudite and exhaustive, but the stakes less dramatic. This is not for want of catastrophes besetting the English around the time. Incurable disease was ubiquitous with, notably, the bubonic plague endemic throughout Culpeper's life (its various outbreaks culminating in the Great Plague of 1665). The civil wars ran from 1642 to 1651. The Little Ice Age had damaged the food economy locally and abroad and was particularly vicious in London in 1650. 1660 marked the Restoration. While Culpeper died of tuberculosis in Spitalfields in 1654, any one of these calamities could easily overtake daily life with fatal consequences.

The book begins with Culpeper's failing health which soon leads to his death. A vulture hovers in the form of a new lodger, Heydon, who has designs both on Culpeper's wife and Culpeper's works. Sir William quickly deploys the somewhat hapless Zacharia who gets three pounds for his mission to locate Culpeper's works and a stern warning from Sir William to keep their connection hidden: 'During your investigations, please practice caution and only reveal our association if absolutely necessary' (33). Eleven pages later Zacharia meets his first contact and reveals that Sir William is behind this adventure. From here, Zacharia interviews booksellers, publishers, and apothecarial profiteers, dropping Sir William's name like a buttered canon ball as he works his way to the final revelation of Nicholas Culpeper's beliefs.

The narrative's urgency, stakes, and emotional range are delimited by this interview format and by an ordering of events that starts the enquiry after Culpeper's death. That Zacharia himself is an erstwhile friend who has not seen Culpeper for over a decade reduces Zacharia's personal investment, distancing him and us from the outcomes and stakes in direct proportion to Zacharia's distance from Culpeper's life. While this is an authorial choice that allows Zacharia to be the innocent abroad who is able to ask questions that tease out the historical record and Culpeper's life and values, tightening the central relationships would have increased the immediacy.

The usual spheres of memory and emotion exploited by fiction – the loss or gaining of love, wealth, standing or liberty, or the risk to life – are things that by and large have happened off-stage or that don't figure in Noble's presentation of Culpeper's life. We skip the triangle between Heydon, Culpeper, and wife Alice, the event told in reportage. Zacharia, as a character who does not either change, examine his internal state, or journey into self-knowledge is, in a number of respects, a tour-guide. The content of Zacharia's interviews cycles around, variously, Culpeper's texts, legacy alchemical theories and their intersection with current alchemical thought, medical astrology and, in familiar millenarian terrain, how the alignment of certain of these alchemical revelations with Christian mysticism will bring forth the second coming of Christ. 'Mary Rand has recently predicted an alchemical adept will soon discover the philosopher's stone, or *aurum potabile*... The Monarchists claim this discovery will herald the coming reign of Christ and bring peace to the Commonwealth' (129).

This is stuff of great moment but more an index of the boundaries of pre-enlightenment thought than a driver of narrative. The menace of the period is referenced but not enacted: we learn in reportage that 'The English Queen jailed a European alchemist who failed to turn base metals into gold' (128), but we aren't invited to live with any of the characters through these kinds of experiences. Rather, the royal edict against alchemy offers the reader a direct example of power constraining sites of knowledge-enquiry during the era – that is, it makes an historical point. In these terms, both Zacharia and Culpeper are non-transitional characters who exist in a pre-enlightenment episteme. The transitions and transitional figures have either been running another track or are on the doorstep: Francis Bacon, Renes Descartes (*Discourse on Method*, 1637), Isaac Newton (*Principia Mathematica*, 1687), John Locke (*Two Treatises of Government*, 1689), the end of the Age of Absolutes, further advances in astronomy, science and civics all causing major tectonic shifts in society. Indeed, as a transitional figure, the fascinating Newton has a foot in both camps: a profound positivist thinker who, at the same time, studied alchemy and advocated toad vomit lozenges as a cure for plague.

Apothecarianism informs much of the story and the specifics of the remedies are entertaining when we see them. For headaches, considered at the time to be caused by

‘excessive heat and dryness of the humours’, Zacharia recommends ‘water lilies or lettuce because being cool and moist, these foods would rebalance the affected humours’ (150).

Through the story and in Noble’s very informative end notes and references we learn that Culpeper himself was a non-conformist who quit his studies at Cambridge (due to romantic matters), did not complete his apprenticeship as an apothecary (financial matters), became ‘embroiled in the battles and was shot in the chest’ (Puritan and Parliamentary political passions) (44), and poison-penned Royalist supporters and the medical hegemony whose good graces could have elevated his rank. While other works on Culpeper revere him as a near rock star revolutionary, there’s no doubt that his efforts to make ‘physic’ accessible to the public by defying the College of Physicians and stripping texts of Latin was a watershed in the approach to public health education.

Scholarship and fiction, then, are intertwined in the purpose and shape of this work and the book’s scholarly antecedents are underlined by the in-text reference numbers. The arresting cover art and the title potentially appeal to the reader of popular fiction as a novel that could sit alongside the antic Harry Potter series. The question concerning which of the many levels of fiction-making the book succeeds at, or succeeds best at, hinges on the positioning of the work. As noted, the publisher markets this as an ‘enthraling novella’, however the work’s origins as historical scholarship leave the stronger impression. Here, *Nicholas Culpeper and the Mystery of the Philosopher’s Stone* successfully introduces the reader to the colourful beliefs and ambitions of 17th century alchemists in a tumultuous age.

Christopher Gist is a writer and screen content producer, previously Commissioning Editor for ABCTV and TVNZ, currently UTS PhD candidate and sessional honours supervisor for Melbourne University VCA.



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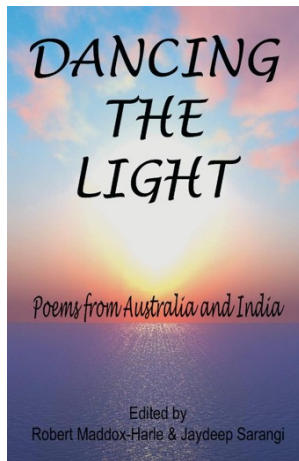
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Waltz to Life

review by Sutanuka Ghosh Roy



Rob Maddox-Harle & Jaydeep Sarangi (eds)

Dancing the Light: Poems from Australia and India

Cyberwit.net, Allahabad UP 2020

ISBN: 978-93-88125-90-1

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When two authors unconnected culturally, geographically, historically or socially, hailing from two poetry-rich nations come together to play with the unlimited possibilities of finding joy and mirth in life, a literary fusion is destined to happen. *Dancing the Light: Poems from Australia and India*, edited by Rob Maddox-Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi, carries in its pages the potential to discover unexpected delight. The anthology is published by Cyberwit.net, and is the seventh book in their Australian-Indian poetry series. The previous anthologies are: *Poetic Connections: Poems From Australia and India* (Lonsdale); *Building*

Bridges: Poems From Australia and India (Maddox-Harle); *Voices Across The Ocean: Poems From Australia and India* (Maddox-Harle & Sarangi); *Homeward Bound: Poems From Australia and India* (Sarangi & Maddox-Harle); *The Land: Poems From Australia and India* (Sarangi & Maddox-Harle); and *Searching For the Sublime* (Sarangi & Maddox-Harle).

Many of the poets have responded directly to the title of the anthology. To examine a little closer, dancing is a symbol of celebration, enjoyment, and here represents the potential to be transported out of the mundane. Light of course, is a metaphor for brightness and clarity, and the ability of the poet to experience enlightenment. Poems in this anthology are a record of deep-seated questioning; minds carrying reverberations from within. These intimate poems manifest the truth of experience through the construction of unique images taken from life. In the Introduction the editors state clearly: 'We wanted this collection to have a positive feel and outcome, no doom and gloom poems dwelling solely on Extinction, Anthropocene Depression, Climate Change Disaster or the woes of the world'. Hence the poets – eleven Indian poets and eleven Australians – are charged with the task of exploring the positive side of life through their work.

The anthology opens with Adrian Rogers' poem 'Botticelli Dances with Venus' where the poet is 'kaleidoscopically colouring memories, / pirouetting moments' of life' (10). Rogers looks beyond geographical boundaries and extends his field of vision to include the 'dying sun' that sits 'above the horizon' (10). It is thrilling to witness Amelia Walker's 'Sky Dance': 'Hot night, storms brewing, / the clouds fox-trot, / slow then faster, / their arms glistening bolts of lightning, / their hearts the beating thunder' (18). In the poem the sky comes to meet the earth and dances with the life it encounters, sprinkling it with joy. Another of Walker's poems, 'Lessons in Dancing' (19) is rewarding for how it teaches through the experience of the poet being taught themselves, recalling how 'most of us hated poetry and dancing and later, / some of us turned to jazz, to rap, / to punk, not realising / these were their own forms / of poetry / and poetry its own kind/ of dance' (19-20).

Basudhara Roy presents her verse from an enlightened plane, reminding us to remain hopeful, 'I do not know / if, when you leave, you think / of me. It does not matter. / All that matters is this door ajar' (29). Furthermore, in 'Journeys' (31) she grapples with the potential for experience to be purposed toward a better future. Wrestling similar themes is Brian Dally, who, wary of pride and arrogance on show when humanity celebrates giant leaps in science, reminds us, 'in the end we're here for one brief dance, and then we're gone, but love and life and death will carry on' (36).

Bronwyn E Owen in 'Healing' pens an aesthetic experience from an enriching encounter with nature. She writes, 'the trees said to me / I am my own guru / and / so are you I didn't understand then / I understand now' (40). Cameron Hindrum slips in some secrets of life to

his readers in 'What Will Survive Us', as he outlines, 'The age of no turning back / – On which we have all turned our backs. / Walking leads me through this quiet / Until I can find the river again: / Which, at least, is honest' (54). Similarly seeking honesty is Christopher (Kit) Kelen, who in the twelve-part poem 'Hardanger Set' sheds bits of imagery, leaving faint, teasing clues of where real life resides. His sparse phrases are best seen in the following lines: 'Have a head of song. / Imagine yourself never touching at all. / That's insect, bird and angel business. / The one breath. / It's so much distance I'm thrown from. / Make the heart empty / Be whole' (61).

In the poem 'Impossible Words' David Hallett explores the limits of language, presenting an intense engagement with the moment, undertaken without the pitfalls of attachment: 'spoken in softest tones / at the break of day and the dawn of night / – impossible words: forever always and never – / to love and be loved (to love and be loved) / that is all' (63). In his second poem featured in the anthology, 'Bridge', Hallett's speaker has an epiphanic moment when they realise it is only love which bridges the gaps between people in life, stating, 'and there is a bridge, / a bridge leaps the waters and the tower of trees, / a bridge of dreams and words, / its path is fern and flower and golden rain, / and always, always the bridge is love' (68).

D C Chambial's 'Beautiful Beyond' recalls a metaphysical devotional poem where the poet expresses his earnest desire to step backward to a place where there is a beauty beyond; a 'Serene Satisfaction, sans deeds, Writ large on every face' (71). Gopal Lahiri's verses have a unique serenity which produces a calming effect on the reader. A true clairvoyant, in his poem 'Healing Space' he writes: 'The invitation is always there to transcend time, / Creating the healing space in nature / In search of the truth.' (78). 'Armistice' by Lahiri (81) remains an aesthetic treat for the readers and 'Dancing Light', much like the rest of his oeuvre, is steeped in hope. Janie Conway Herron's poem 'Winter Nights' (84) is a feast for the senses. There is a neatness to her poem 'Home' which describes 'That silent place / where my own words / flow' (85). Jaydeep Sarangi's poems 'Truth' and 'A Poem Away' have a magnetic pull because of the element of drama in them. He writes, 'I want to be a river, someday when my prayers will be done' (95). His soft focus is on life; all of human life with its myriad hues, and the substance of this, liquefied in dappled tones.

Laxman Singh Rathore seeks blessings from 'The Being who possesses neither name nor form, / nor a fixed domain' in 'Divine Glimpses' (102). Malaswami Jacob recreates an old Mizo folklore about the journey of the spirits of the dead to the other world in 'Black Lake' (111-12). Poems by Mark Cornell, 'Our Dusk Visitor' and 'Mr Plover' are buoyed with a quizzical humour. Nathalie Buckland writes about the binaries of individual identity and anonymity in the poem 'Ordinary Miracles' (127). The speaker of Padmaja Iyengar-Paddy's lyrical poems strives to remain anchored against the storm and stress of lived experience. In the poem aptly titled, 'Enlightenment', she writes, 'I felt a strange light pervading my whole

being Meaning of Life I finally saw without really seeing' (138). Equally, the poems of Pankajam Kottarath reintroduce us to our own experiences. There is a distinct sensation of gliding in Paramita Mukherjee Mullick's 'When I became Queen For a Day' (150). In it, the verse has the effect of feather light bristles in some places, while words are arrested in diverse splotches at other places, yet in both cases the poem favours chance over life.

Robert Maddox-Harle's deeply felt verses, 'The Return' and the eponymous 'Dancing the Light', are full of the aches of existence. No doubt a different experience for different people, Maddox-Harle demonstrates how the fissures that we create in life are filled up by poetry and its attendant virtues. He writes, 'the realisation that everything is light, photons and pixels / dancing in harmony, / a Waltz in the zero-point-field', leads him to assert that, 'if that's all there is, then let's keep dancing' (159). Saima Afreen's poems are an exploration of the complex cross-currents blowing across societies, politics, ecologies and economies. The poems 'Of Dark Suns' and 'A Couplet' are steeped in life and its memories, and the plethora of thoughts which these evoke. Her verses are engaging beyond her extraordinary technical virtuosity. Like a guitarist, Sunil Sharma's agile verses glide nimbly over the frets sans any kind of visible effort or scraping. This is evident in the lyrical phrasing of 'Light': 'eyes closed, lips muttering hymns composed thousands of years before – and still sung with gusto in the middle-class homes believing in old gods, in a commercial city' (170). This easy juxtaposition highlights the poem's stunning simplicity, making it a contender to be considered a modern classic. Fittingly, the final poem in the collection, 'Dancing Light' (175-76) embeds a subtle melody to mask the daunting technical work it undertakes, being both a transportation out of the mundane and the experience of the poet's own enlightened thought.

The editors of this anthology Rob Maddox-Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi have not been daunted by this formidable task. Their selection of poets masterfully maintains a balance between gender, age, race and ideology. Few could have done better. The diversity of personal experiences and poetic techniques collected here will surely, as has been the case with other Cyberwit anthologies, allow readers to broaden their horizons. This anthology will surely appeal to scholars, researchers and students who seek poetry that pursues a better understanding of the subtle nuances of life.

Dr Sutanuka Ghosh Roy is Assistant Professor at Tarakeswar Degree College, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal. She is currently engaged in active research in the areas of Eighteenth Century literature, Indian English literature, Canadian Studies, Post-colonial literature, Australian Studies and Dalit literature. She has published widely and presented papers at national and international seminars. She is a regular contributor of research articles to papers and anthologies, national and international journals of repute.



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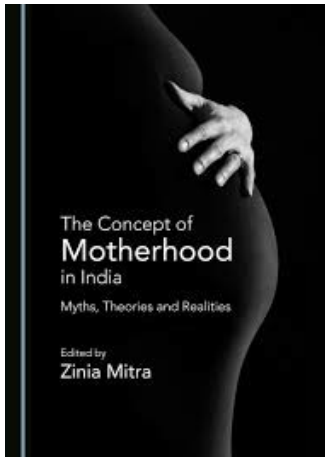
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Motherhood through a different lens

review by Claudia Pharès



Zinia Mitra (ed)

The Concept of Motherhood in India: Myths, Theories and Realities

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle UK 2020

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Hb 128pp GBP61.99

As the home becomes a site of resistance, the personal becomes political. Mothers fought to reshape motherhood outside its patriarchal essentialist parameters. This is an ongoing battle that has yet reached parts of the world where freedom to health, education, and safety are still an issue.

In the introduction to this edited collection of writings on motherhood in India, editor Zinia Mitra begins with a quote from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*: 'All human life on the

planet is born of women' (1). Mitra convincingly addresses the power women hold in supporting and caring for the world of tomorrow. This sets the tone for Mitra's book as recognizing the seemingly prevailing lack of recognition of the important role mothers have in current societies, whether in India or the rest of the world.

Mitra teaches English at the University of Bengal, in India. The idea behind the book stemmed from her interests in exploring conflicts between the idealised and real lived experiences of mothers in India. It consists of an anthology of essays written by scholars on the evolving concept of motherhood experienced in India from past to present times. The book is divided into two parts containing three essays each. Part I, 'Myths', explores the influence of myths and folklore on the representations and stereotypes of motherhood. The contributing texts are: 'Mother: Archetype and Beyond' by Tutun Muherje; 'Myth, Motherhood, and Mainstream Hindi Cinema' by Shoma A Chatterji; and 'Mother is the Buddha at Home *Gedara Budun Amma*' by Daya Dissanayake.

Part II, 'Theories and Realities', pertains to contemporary ideologies and influences surrounding motherhood in India and how these shape the current image of the mother. In the first essay, 'Bodies and Embodiments: Theories of Motherhood', Mitra covers how contemporary psychoanalytical, developmental and gendered theories have influenced the experience of motherhood in India today. The second, 'Motherhood and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971)', by Mossarap Hossain Khan, examines the lived experiences of Muslim mothers. The third, 'Single Motherhood: A decentralised Status in Search of a Centre' by Anhuradha Kunda, explores how single motherhood has become more accepted in contemporary India.

While Part I covers older conservative ideologies regarding motherhood Part II presents a more progressive interpretation on the same concept. This book's linear framework effectively encompasses the editor's method to cover various explorations of the concepts of motherhood over time. The selection of contributors reveals a caring approach in addressing the different concepts of motherhood experienced in India through the disciplines of history, arts/culture, myth/folklore, religion, psychoanalytical theories, feminism and social studies.

In essence, this anthology confirms how astoundingly disempowering representations of motherhood have been in India until recently. Current day motherhood in India is beginning to be socially accepted as a multifaceted concept deviating from its original patriarchal social constructs.

As a visual artist and a mother with an interest on mother-centred feminism, I have encountered strikingly similar findings surrounding the image of the mother and motherhood in Western culture throughout my own Masters Degree research. The book

conveys feelings ranging from outrage to a sense of hopefulness when it comes to perceived and lived experience of motherhood. This collection of scholarly essays gives a concise overview on how patriarchy has shaped the concept of motherhood in India until recently. This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in understanding how time, history and culture have managed to slowly change a non-Western society's narrative surrounding the concepts of motherhood.

Part I: 'Myths' examines the various contrived and reductive definitions of motherhood, which mostly verge on biological essentialism. This section supports that motherhood is a patriarchal construct that subjugates women to impossible standards. As observed in Tutun Muherjee's essay: 'Although vigorously challenged by feminists from 1970s onwards, cultures like India which are predominantly patriarchal define woman's essential purpose to be her reproductive function... (19) The text exposes how patriarchal motherhood denies mothers a voice and their subjectivity on how they choose to be a mother. The author further defends the idea that motherhood is in flux and cannot be defined through preconceived ideals.

Shoma A Chatterji's essay in Part I unpacks how mainstream Hindi cinema today is embracing a more progressive image of the mother. Indian cinema was originally strongly influenced by the mother archetype. Patriarchal culture has similarly shaped Hollywood cinema in projecting idealised heteronormative portraits of women and mothers throughout history. In her essay Chatterji cleverly dissects how mainstream Hindi cinema has represented the mother and motherhood with Goddess-like attributes such as all-sacrificing, all-forgiving, all-loving. These unrealistic standards are also embedded in the motherhood narrative in Western culture. Andrea O'Reilly, motherhood studies professor and feminist theorist, asserts that in Western cultures, the 'good mother' is portrayed as being altruistic, devoted, cheerful, patient, loving, selfless, and child-centred (O'Reilly 2016: 12).

Fortunately, the real lived experiences of motherhood fuelled mothers to reclaim their subjectivity through self-empowerment, activism and political stance extending from the domestic setting. In Part II, this is exemplified in Mossarap Hossain Khan's essay on political motherhood during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 as seen through a memoir and novels. Khan draws attention to how that war instigated the rise of the Muslim mother as 'political mother' in Bangladesh. Concurrently and on the flip side, women who experienced war rape or 'birangona' were no longer considered deemed to be evoking the mother or motherhood. It is interesting to acknowledge how political motherhood was encouraged to flourish beyond the private domestic sphere and how the latter became enmeshed with sentiment of nationalism. Whereas 'birangona', who were essentially war victims, were outcasted regardless of their ability to convey nationalistic pride and/or reflect motherhood attributes such as nurturing and caring. Khan compellingly sheds light on the

conflicting representations of motherhood for Muslim mothers and how the powerful influence of a nation's governance was responsible for it.

Chatterji compares and contrasts different Hindi movies from the early days to contemporary day Hindi cinema. The various descriptions of selected Hindi movie plots seem to identify different types of mothers extending beyond the diminutive patriarchal idealised image. This clearly supports Chatterji's point of view of a positive change in mainstream Hindi cinema.

As previously identified, Indian myths and folklore have influenced the projected unrealistic image of the mother as seen in the early days of Hindi cinema. On the same token, so has religion over time. However, the original core values of Buddhist religion glorified the mother and motherhood in an empowering manner. Daya Dissanayake's essay on the mother as Buddha states 'Motherhood is a higher state than the masculine and the feminine' (44). The author points out how culture, politics, demography, economy and society may have all been factors negatively influencing the modern interpretation of Buddhist Dhamma doctrines. Over time, it demoted mothers to lesser members of society as the weaker sex. Dissanayake supports her point through analysis of various excerpts of sacred texts. In essence, these new versions of the doctrines robbed mothers the respect and veneration originally appointed to their image and identity.

Part II contains more relatable content to me, especially with Zinia Mitra's essay 'Bodies and Embodiments: Theories of Motherhood'. The author explores Western theories on motherhood by feminist writers such as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan, to name a few. Mitra repositions strong feminist perspectives on motherhood in relation to psychoanalytical, anthropological, and political theories. The essay's strength lies in the extensive research in supporting the various perspectives on how the concept of motherhood is predominantly patriarchal in nature and how feminist writers have attempted to challenge this. The recurrent theme in Part I that ideal motherhood is unattainable resonates in this essay too. I agree with the author that although the concept of motherhood is evolving, there is still a prevailing sense of idealism regarding what constitutes being a mother today.

In support of examining the projected ideal of motherhood within and beyond the household, Anuradha Kunda's essay unpacks a new concept in modern India: single motherhood. As a single mother myself, I empathised with the harsh experiences of stigma associated with raising children by myself after a divorce. Following my decision to end my relationship, I was overwhelmed with shame and a sense of failure stemming from my own limiting beliefs surrounding single motherhood and those of the circle of people I was then part of.

A recurring theme in this book is the contriving nature of patriarchy in relation to the idealised experiences of motherhood and the resulting lack of subjectivity and freedom experienced by women. Kunda draws comparisons between the single motherhood as portrayed in Margaret Atwood's 'The Edible Woman' and Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things', demonstrating how cultural context shapes the experiences and leads to different fate. One concludes that single motherhood is becoming more acceptable in India for independent women with great financial stability. I wonder, what is the experience of single motherhood in women in vulnerable financial situations? The inclusion of this essay is valuable for depicting a progression towards freer lived experiences of motherhood in India. It clearly shows that there remains ambivalence towards the concept of single motherhood. Nonetheless, motherhood in India is shifting towards a more empowering image reflective of modern lived experiences of motherhood.

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Claudia Pharès is a Canadian-born, Melbourne-based visual artist of Vietnamese-Egyptian descent. She completed her Masters in Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne. Her research was on 'Strategies: An Artist-Mother's Maintenance Manifesto'. www.claudiaphares.com