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***I go far away sometimes: queering the book review***

Abstract:

This work is an experiment in queering the book review genre. It is a conversation or dialogue between two queer writers, Karina Quinn and Dallas John Baker, about Baker's novella *I Go Far Away Sometimes* (2014) and the practice and process of queer writing. This queered review touches on queer desire, the abject, sentimentality, metaphors for writing practice and discusses a queer ethics of seeing. As such, the review performs a kind of knowledge creation beyond what is usual for a book review (y Miranda 1996).

Biographical note:

Dr. Karina Quinn is a researcher, writer and award-winning poet whose work lies at the nexus of feminist and queer theories of the body, autobiography, and philosophy. She is published nationally and internationally, and her first book, *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body*, is due to be released by Australian Scholarly Publishing in November 2015. Quinn is a lecturer in Interdisciplinary Foundation Studies in the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce at La Trobe University.

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Creative Writing – Queer writing – book reviews – Dallas Baker

## Introduction

I have a habit of wanting to queer (yes, noun has flipped to verb) book reviews. What follows is not a guided walk through Dallas Baker's text, nor an offering of specific criticisms or insights as to the quality of the work. What follows is a conversation, between two queer writers, about the novella *I Go Far Away Sometimes* (2014). This conversation took place over the course of a week, via email, using a model similar to that of Donna Lee Brien whose interview with Lee Gutkind was published in this journal in 2000. Ideas were thrown around digitally between Toowoomba and Melbourne. Dallas had just moved house, and I was working as a sign language interpreter in a print-making studio. Surrounded by the smell of ink and acid baths, I entered a kind of frenzy: the particular joy that comes from an exchange that is intense, and moves quickly, and where the parties involved do not always agree.

In her paper, 'On Book Reviewing', Evelina Orteza y Miranda suggests that the Book Review section is 'the knowledge creating/knowledge examining domain of the journal', and argues for book reviews as a site of change (1996: 197). This review touches on queer writing, the abject, sentimentality, desire and discusses a queer ethics of seeing – and so performs a kind of knowledge creation and examination.

Dallas John Baker's novella, *I Go Far Away Sometimes* (IGFAS) was published in 2014 by Stein & Wilde. Part romance, part tragedy, Baker's novella takes us into the lives of Jennie Scott, and a character largely based on the author, named Dallas. We travel with them through past and present, trauma and love, and in the end find warmth and the blessing that is companionship.

Dallas Baker and I have only ever met through text. He was the first person to publish my queer short fiction – two dark, glittering stories pushing up and out from the Sydney LGBTIQ community. These stories are so 'real' they are sometimes hard to read (I am told, especially by white, heterosexual, cis-gendered people). The first story, 'Dose', is a second person narrative that details 24 hours in the life of a heroin and methadone addict while the second, 'Water and Oil', follows the protagonist as she wakes from a night of sex working, and prepares and then goes into the next night of work. These are stories that bring the reader close to corporeal detail, to the minutiae of the abject, and this detail has a way of insinuating itself into the reader's body, and of staying long after the words have been read. I had begun to think they were worthless, or else saying too much, and would never find a home. But then I stumbled across *Polari Journal*, and sent them off, and Dallas gave those queer, sex-filled, abject stories their perfect home.

That was not the first time I'd had trouble publishing queer writing that contained queer subjects, nor will it be the last. So from this queer author's perspective, reading Dallas Baker's novella *I Go Far Away Sometimes* is a privilege, and also a relief. Every time another fair, considered, respectful and complex representation of queerness hits the shelves or appears on screen, the 'symbolic annihilation' (Gross 1991: 21) that is enacted through repeatedly mis-representing or purposely making invisible queer lives and communities undergoes a reversal. *I Go Far Away Sometimes* is part of that reversal.

QUINN: *I Go Far Away Sometimes* leaves the reader wreathed with smell: jacaranda flowers and furniture polish, cigarette smoke and fried bacon. The story has a lingering scent, and traces present and past as it makes its way across the page. There is a feeling of nostalgia, and even sentimentality. Are you specifically utilising this style of writing as a counterpoint to the kind of queer writing we've come to expect: namely writing that is painfully 'real', often grungy, and sometimes hard to read?

DJB: When writing *I Go Far Away Sometimes* I deliberately drew on nostalgia and sentimentality. I have a few reasons. I feel that nostalgia and sentimentality are the abject of much contemporary writing. I tend toward focusing on the things that are out of fashion, for whatever reason. I want to write back *in* what has been cut *out*, and for me whatever is cut out is queer by virtue of being excluded. Nostalgia and sentimentality are therefore queer to me and so I to focus on them. My focus is always on the abject queer.

For me, the grammatical epitome of the queer is the adjective and adverb. Unlike other writers I do not cut them out but add them in. One of the ways I foster a sense of nostalgia is by referring to the sense experience of my own past, the smells, sounds and colours. Often the things about my past that I remember fondly have some resonance with others like me (and those not so like me).

When I first opened my eyes, I wasn't sure what I was seeing. I was staying with friends of friends and not familiar with my surroundings. She loomed over me, an unusually tall woman in her mid-thirties, weighing 300 pounds at the very least and wearing a white beehive wig. The wig gave off a faint scent of cigarette smoke mixed with Kahlúa. The false eyelashes she wore made her eyelids look like huge butterflies (Baker 2014: 1).

A significant part of our sense experience is smell, so that is something I often note when I read (as in the excerpt from *I Go Far Away Sometimes* above). My own memory is full of scent and light. I tend to remember how things smell and the way light falls in a space. I am more likely to remember something if there is a colour or smell involved. I try to include those things in my writing, written with a similar reflective quality to memory, sort of less direct, less propelled by action and more propelled by thought.

QUINN: It seems that light is very much connected to 'what's left out' in the ways that light can illuminate, but also obfuscate. It can be blinding or soft, harsh or caressing. And of course the act of lighting something up means shadows are thrown onto something else. For this reason, *I Go Far Away Sometimes* has a photographic quality to it; when I finished reading I was left with not only the sense of smell we were discussing, but also a series of photographs, that assembled as I read. Two boys under the summer moon on the lakeside. Their curling bodies in a crowded room. Jennie Scott in her sequined dress, a cigarette burning between her fingers. A boy seated at a table in a yellow kitchen. An old Queenslander with its doors flung open, leaking light. Susan Sontag writes that photographs are 'a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing' (Sontag 1990: 3).

In the sense that choosing the subjects we write about is also a kind of photography, or aim, would you call the deliberate act of queer writing an 'ethics of seeing'?

DJB: That's a great way to put it: a queer ethics of seeing. I prefer that to the idea of an LGBTI or queer sensibility, which depends (sometimes) on a notion of stable identities. I would add that for me it's a Foucauldian inspired ethics, one that not only sees and records in a certain way by conscious choice but also produces the person seeing. There is also an ethics around who I choose to write about, and which types of subjectivity I disseminate through my writing. I always choose the subjectivity that is at the margin, those most excluded. I also choose to create characters who I feel some affinity for, whose trajectory is alongside my own. That is about expressing myself, shining a light on my own feelings and beliefs, but also about shining a light on my community, especially those parts of my community that are marginalized, both by mainstream society and by elements of the lesbian and gay community itself.



Fig. 1: Dallas John Baker in 1994. Photograph by Jo Hoy.



Fig. 2: Karina Quinn. Photograph by Amanda James.

Transsexual, transgender and intersex people are often at the centre of my work, because of my own history as a gender nonconforming person. In my writing, the development of character is a kind of activism, the production and then humanizing of people treated as the abject (those excluded). I often think of it as a creative expression of Human Rights ideas.

QUINN: I'm wondering about this pressure/desire to redress the imbalance in writing (in fact in all types of representation) because I feel it too. If I don't go some way towards inclusivity, and a re-centering of those of us who are left on the margins, then

I am failing my community: and by this I mean not only the LGBTIQ community. I mean all of us. The 'we-world' as Jean-Luc Nancy (2008: 81) would say. If we do not constantly press against mainstream representations of the world that we live in, we will always find ourselves not just un-represented, but erased.

This brings me to Jennie Scott as a character: larger than life because she needs to be, because in many ways she has never been allowed to occupy the centre, to take up space. Glimmering, light filled, she shimmers in and out of the narrative. She is simultaneously dream and nightmare; she is Callois' version of a schizophrenic.

*I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself...*  
Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at *himself* from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. (Callois and Shepley 1984: 30, author's emphasis).

Is that a fair representation of Jennie? Is she 'the dark space where things cannot be put'?

DJB: Part of me wants to say yes to this question, part to say no. The dark space is perhaps where Jennie is put by others, into that place where that which is despised must go, where the abject must go. But Jennie is all about coming out of that space as best she can. Her memories are in the dark space, but she chooses to live in the light.

The dark space idea reminds me of Judith Butler's notion of the uninhabitable body, the unknowable body (1993). Certainly, that idea could be applied to Jennie's experience of memory, which is like an uninhabitable space that turns her mute.

It's like I said, hateful things [on TV] are fine if you can turn 'em off when you've had enough of 'em. It's the hateful things you can't turn off that I don't like. You know, like nightmares and stuff.'

'Do you have many nightmares?'

'Gawd, do I. Sometimes I think all the nightmares in the world are livin' in my head, like my brain is a store-all where every bad dream that ever existed is kept.'

'What's a store-all?'

'A place where you put all the stuff that don't fit in your house.'

'A storage unit?'

'That's what I said, a storage unit' (Baker 2014: 21).

The other character in the story, the one based on myself, is more a dark space critter than Jennie: split, divided; partially hidden. This isn't necessarily evident on the page, even though the writer is always partially hidden because they are off-page. That is the position of the queer writer in general, don't you think?

QUINN: The queer writer as dark space critter (split, penumbral, found in gaps and seams): yes, I can most certainly relate. And the queer writers I love: Eileen Myles, Kathy Acker, Leslie Feinberg, even Jeanette Winterson, seem to have that in common too. I have this strong sense when I am writing, and when I read queer writing, that what we make, and where we come from, is entwined with desire, with finding a shimmer (just like Jennie's sliver sequined dress, or moonlight reflected in lake water) in the dark. The image that always springs to mind is that of a fist-sized, unpolished

and uncut ruby, bloody and deep, with a candle behind it. What we see is a pinch of light in its core, is a warmer red in the centre, is a way through. This is how I think of queer writing and writers. And in that thinking I am reminded of Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*:

The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc.; and, lost in the midst of a text (not *behind* it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author (1976: 27).

Did *I Go Far Away Sometimes* choose you? Did it desire you? Did you find the character based on yourself inexorably drawn there, like an eye to the point of light in a fist-sized ruby?

DJB: That quote by Barthes is very compelling, because it is, really, poetry, but I do not relate to it as a writer. I am not fond of the idea that stories exist in some metaphysical space waiting to be told. That has a slight odour of essentialism to me. I prefer to think of the narratives I produce as being purposeful conglomerates of images, ideas, memories and language that I put together consciously, on reflection on something. Admittedly, that reflection is often a compulsive one, on a single image, piece of dialogue or idea that, for reasons I cannot explain, is really intriguing to me in the moment.

I like to think of a piece of writing as a patchwork of what Foucault called 'the already said' (ctd in Rabinow 1997: 209), the ideas, words, scenes and stories that we have encountered in our lives that are there in our memory. It is this bank of the already said that a writer draws on when producing a narrative. So, for me, writing is not about becoming some kind of conduit or channel for a pre-existing story but about being a *bricoleur* (a builder or engineer) who puts together the bits and pieces of narrative already there in the mind/memory into a new shape.

I do, however, think that you are correct in linking writing practice and desire. I think they are very similar practices – creative, pleasurable, productive (of identities) and somewhat compulsive or addictive. There is certainly desire involved in the practice of writing as I undertake it, but for me it is an active and conscious desire, something that I ignite myself and then fan or feed so that I can see what it will grow into. For me, sexual desire is similar, it is not unconscious (in fact I do not even believe in an unconscious mind), but rather highly conscious and deliberate. I choose what I desire. I don't believe that love or desire are things out of our control.

For me, love and desire are choices, perhaps not highly verbal or language-based choices, but they are choices, choices that encourage my body to respond to certain stimulations or triggers more than others. In a way, I am aware that I have trained myself to respond more and more strongly to those sensations or objects that I have selected as resonating with my sense of myself and that I have also manufactured an equally strong distaste, even revulsion, for those sensations or objects that do not fit my sense of self. Perhaps we all do this. Desire is at the heart of the construction of identity and I believe that desire is a selective process that we form ourselves.

When I write, I am manufacturing scenes or narratives in which desire, those attractions and revulsions, are played out, not just the attractions and revulsions of sexuality, of physical pleasure, but of intellectual and emotional pleasure as well; all of the likes and dislikes that make up a person's sense of themselves, from the clothes they wear to the food they eat. When I am writing, I am aware that I am producing and disseminating ideas (worlds) about what or who people are, creating categories (or even subjectivities or identities) and then sometimes breaking those categories down.

I started writing *I Go Far Away Sometimes* because of a memory, a memory of someone I met briefly in the 1990s who affected me quite deeply. As I reflected on that memory, it became clear to me that this person and that moment triggered a change in direction for me around how I felt about myself, and how I felt about the town where I grew up. My place of origin is a powerful part of my identity. So when I was writing that piece I was recording a moment in which my sense of self had shifted and in the writing I was encouraging further change, or deepening my understanding of that change. For me, writing is not just about producing a narrative to share with others. It is also an act of intervening in my own sense of myself. When I write, I am re-writing myself through a process of reflection. And what is writing but reflection expressed verbally? The excerpt below from IGFAS connects with this idea of reflection triggering change:

As I watched Jennie struggle with her painful memories—her chubby hands trembling like dying butterflies, her eyes fluttering as her mind tried to flee into her few happy childhood moments—I realised that when I'd left Toowoomba for Brisbane I hadn't really been running away from anything. Compared to Jennie, what did I have to run away from?

Sitting there in that immaculate kitchen it became clear that I'd actually been running *towards* something, towards the promise offered by that lakeside kiss, a promise of pleasure and joy in a place where I could be myself. True, Cole had hurt me at a time when I was vulnerable, but I had tasted a promise in his kiss, and that promise could never be taken away.

No-one had ever made that promise to Jennie, not once. In the absence of that promise, she had nothing to hold onto except the memory of her mother, her version of that yellow-walled kitchen. Jennie was living, painful proof that having only the past to hold onto was an unhealthy thing (Baker 2014: 35).

Although I like the metaphor of queer writing as a ruby, with a hard exterior but glowing interior, it is not one that resonates strongly with me. For me, queer writing is a lot like gender itself, a practice that sort of floats in-between language, memory and imagination, all of which are fluid and difficult to contain or pin down. Queer writing, like the word 'queer' itself, is difficult to define, fluid, resistant to categorisation, diverse in both content and process. Is it really possible for us ever to come to a final definition of what queer writing is or isn't, either in terms of content or how it is practiced?

QUINN: The image of the backlit ruby for me is more descriptive of queer stories than queer writing; the idea that our stories are often dark, but hold and sustain hope

and connection. Can queer writing be defined? If it could, it probably wouldn't be queer ... Or perhaps it is that there are a multitude of definitions, each located in the space between writer, reader and text.

My writing comes from the body, from the senses, and, like you, from memory. Like you, I deploy writing, purposefully, with intent. I am less a conduit than a provocateur, and I intuitively resist categorisation. I believe that queer writing acts, in the world, by challenging existing structures, by embedding in the bodies of readers, by insisting on a queer ethics of seeing. Vicky Kirby, in discussing Derrida's famous remark that there is 'no outside-text' (1967: 158) says that writing 'articulates a *différential* of space/time, an inseparability between representation and substance that rewrites causality' (1997: 61).

When we produce and publish queer writing, we rewrite causality, we insist on being seen and being read; we draw the abject other close, and protected, send them out into the world of text.

What happens next is up to the reader, because always hovering behind/under/next-to queer writing is queer reading.

What happens next is that the reader and queer writers walk in a world with more queer text, with more ways to write, and read, and re/view; with more space for 'the already said' to be said in other and Othered ways.

What happens next? What happens next?

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