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Towards a hospitable poetics: Accommodating dementia through contemporary lyric

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Towards a hospitable poetics: Accommodating dementia through contemporary lyric

Abstract:

Dementia is one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century. According to Alzheimer's International, there were over fifty-five million people with dementia worldwide in 2020. Dementia forces us to scrutinise how community, care, and personhood are defined. While there has been increasing representation of dementia through narrative-driven forms, it is precisely poetry's capacity to move beyond the meaning-making functions of language and narrative that enables it to better accommodate the morphic nature of dementia and to challenge its stigma. While considering how the impact of dementia may vary between vocational writers, those new to writing, and those in positions of care, this article considers how contemporary lyric may offer a space of hospitality that enables us to live with and alongside dementia ethically. Focusing predominantly on Australian examples, it considers how poetry seeks to provide a space, at times paradoxical, enabling agency, recognition, and freedom while also navigating forms of attachment and belonging. It considers how poetry can articulate dementia as historically and culturally nuanced and how poetry may also be able to navigate states of difficulty and precarity.

Biographical note:

Ann Vickery teaches writing and literature at Deakin University. She is the author of *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000) and *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry* (Salt, 2007). She is also co-author of *The Intimate Archive: Journeys through Private Papers* (National Library of Australia, 2009) and co-editor of *Poetry and the Trace* (Puncher and Wattmann, 2013). She is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Bees Do Bother: An Antagonist's Care Pack* (Vagabond Press, 2021).

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The seeds for this essay came from reading Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), an autofiction exploring social citizenship and selves undergoing change. Nelson uses the Argo of Greek myth in thinking about how one's identity as a person might be kept even as its constitutive parts change over time. Nelson's concept of care relies on an argument around social reproduction – if one's parenting is not 'good enough', then the consequences are dire for the children. Care ensures that future selves, and by extension, future society, does not fail. What might it mean, however, to consider those whose selves are undergoing change but who are inevitably going to falter and fail? Dementia does not hold the promise of happiness or pleasure as by-products of care in the way that parenthood does. This essay is the beginning of a thinking around the possibility of navigating hospitable poetics in a social landscape that is largely inhospitable for those with dementia. This year, in the same week that we celebrated my son's eighteenth birthday, the final report of the Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2021) was released. It revealed systematically inadequate and sometimes highly abusive practices within institutional aged care.

Having suffered dementia for around a decade, my father was present at my son's birthday and able to know that we were celebrating something. He might be considered relatively 'lucky' in having my stepmother prematurely end her career in order to become his primary carer. I know something of the ongoing difficulty and isolation they have experienced but, I would think, only a fraction of it. Our treatment of those with dementia is an index to how we think of ourselves as a community and how we value a person. Dementia is currently the second major cause of death for Australian men and the number of people with dementia worldwide was over fifty-five million in 2020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics; Alzheimer's Disease International). In the last decade, dementia has been well represented through narrative-driven forms, most recently in films like *The Father* (2020) and *Supernova* (2020). While there is beginning to be a rise in poetry engaging with dementia, there is still little scholarly attention as to its transformative potential. This essay argues that it is precisely poetry's capacity to move beyond the meaning-making functions of language and narrative that enables it to accommodate dementia's morphic nature of dementia and to challenge its cultural stigma. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the lyric might offer a space of hospitality that enables us to live with and alongside dementia ethically. While poetry traditionally has had a public role as a vehicle of mourning and consolation, I want to consider its capacity to transform our processes of recognition and inclusion.

Dementia results in a greater cognitive decline than the usual ageing process. As a 'progressive neurodegenerative syndrome' it is marked by 'a constellation of symptoms' caused by a large number of underlying conditions (Bitenc, 2020, p. 8). Only one of these is Alzheimer's disease although it is the most common cause. Alzheimer's emerged as a disease category in the 1970s but was somewhat sidelined by HIV/AIDS (Kunow, 2015, p. 282). Diagnosis often informs how a person is subsequently treated. Kate Swaffer points out that too often people with dementia come to be defined by the symptoms of the disease rather than the people they still are (Pitt, 2016). In effect, the sufferer becomes the disease, known through an overdetermined narrative that marginalises or renders them invisible within the social landscape.

As with Covid today (and AIDS before it), dementia has been viewed as threatening broader welfare, and attracts overlapping negative tropes (Kunow, 2015, p. 282). A prevailing one is

of contagion, with dementia frequently likened to a plague or epidemic. Such a trope goes hand in hand with responses focused on containment or expulsion. Another common trope views dementia as monstrous (Herskovits, 1995, p.153), the afflicted being reduced to less than human or non-human. Related to this is the figure of the zombie, with dementia often likened to a ‘living death’ (Behuniak, 2011, p.71) and those with dementia as ‘husks’ or ‘ghosts of their former selves’ (Bitenc, 2020, p.10). A further trope is the alien. Susan M. Schultz (2014) discerns that dementia’s spatial disorientation aligns its sufferer with refugees, and asylum seekers (n.p.). This trope foregrounds social borders and a lack of belonging. As Catherine Malabou (2008) contends, Alzheimer’s ‘is the nemesis of connectionist society ... as a disaffiliated person: errant, without memory, asocial, without recourse’ (p. 52). Dementia has lastly been framed through the destructive forces of nature and as a potential threat to the human world when reaching excess proportions. Hannah Zelig (2012) points to dementia regularly being referred to as a ‘wave’ that then transforms into a ‘flood’ or ‘tsunami’ (p. 260). The net effect of all these negative tropes is an increased likelihood of hostility.

Scientists have turned unsurprisingly to figurative language in order to represent dementia. Hannah Zelig notes how ‘plaques and tangles’ has been used to describe the knottiness of an Alzheimer-impacted brain (Zelig, 2012, p. 261). Catherine Malabou asserts that the descriptive frameworks of neuroscience will always reflect their social conditions and any approach to how a brain works will be political. Brain plasticity, for instance, can be described in terms of efficacy, adaptability and flexibility, aligning it with the norms of capitalism. Malabou suggests that an alternative description of brain plasticity might ‘allow us to think a multiplicity of interactions in which the participants exercise transformative effects on one another through the demands of recognition, of non-domination, and of liberty’ (2008, p. 31). It is worth thinking about the continuing influence of the Enlightenment and how personhood has been understood through values that emphasise functionality within the social order: autonomy, capability, and rationality (Bitenc, 2020, p. 10). Malabou argues that even with dementia’s defiance of these values, neuroscientific discourse often seeks to be recuperative and to include dementia within a normalising vision of society.

From Sappho onwards, the lyric has tested the limits of the self and relationality, exploring states of human incompleteness, liminality, and change. Lyric traditionally has drawn together the intimate and the social, as well as conveyed experiences that seem incomprehensible. An example is the poetry of World War I which explored the impact of shell shock, gas attacks, and new military tactics and technologies, and the poetry emerging out of World War II that understood its own inadequacy. Tom Kitwood states that, ‘There are some aspects of human experience for which the most ordinary prosaic forms of speech are too thin, too linear, too precise’ (1997, p. 76). What poetry can do is stretch the expressive potential of language and form and generate responses in the reader that may be both affective and cognitive. In so doing, it counters the stranglehold of reductive tropes surrounding dementia and can provide, as Zelig suggests, a means to represent those with dementia ‘not as passive recipients or medical “cases” but rather as sentient, active human beings’ (2014, p. 162).

The most common symptoms of dementia are defamiliarisation, comprising of loss of memory and language, spatial disorientation, and behavioural change. Whereas narrative is a sense-making device, dementia often resists sense; it is errant and mutable. Accordingly, it requires

particular attention to the contingency of meaning and the ways in which meaning is made and lost and remade and lost again. Dementia raises questions about accommodation as both space and process. Jacques Derrida argues that hospitality ‘has to do with the *ethos*, that is, the residence, one’s home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to others, to others *as our own* [emphasis added] or foreigners’ (2001, pp. 16-17). I want to emphasise that phrase, ‘to others as our own’. In a world where the familiar becomes strange, how might we entertain a hospitable poetics towards dementia?

Kant (1795/2006) initially viewed hospitality as reliant on reciprocal relations, in that the stranger had a right to be welcomed, but there were also expectations on the guest’s behaviour. In contrast, Levinas (1961/1969) proposes an obligation to and unrestricted welcome of the Other. Yet as Derrida notes, these both presume an ideal horizon. The mess of reality intrudes. The dementia patient may feel, at times, curtailed and thwarted. At the same time, their behavioural change and unsettledness may also threaten the carer’s emotional wellbeing and equilibrium. Any hospitable poetics must therefore navigate a tenuous dynamic between self and other. Within a hospitable poetics, there must be paradoxical accommodation of hostility or what Sianne Ngai (2005) calls ‘ugly feelings’. So, I am not arguing for a hospitable poetics as a shelter and practice that is able to be always maintained, let alone wholly achievable; this is a poetics (involving space and process) that has and holds hurt, misreading, frustration, and disruption.

Susan M. Schultz (2014) suggests that writing might be a way to wander with the dementia person: ‘A letting go of the boundaries, the borders of self, of nation, and the respectful entering into a more chaotic, less limited place’ (n.p.). She argues that the plasticity of poetry makes it a highly appropriate form to represent the mobility of dementia (n.p.). While a practice of writing may wander, a poem has spatial and temporal constraints. I want to consider how the poem might open its doors in particular ways. Rather than consider the poem through the modern form of hospice as a place to care for the sick or dying, I want to go back to its much earlier meaning as a guesthouse or lodging for travellers. How might it provide an open rather than closed form that enables multiple and shifting encounters with dementia?

While Schultz focuses on dementia’s tendency towards dispersal and Malabou on disconnection and freedom from the social network, I want to go back to the importance of relationality and attachment. Poetry’s heightened relationship to feeling might be thought of as its capacity for ‘stickiness’. Stickiness might be associated with the floor of the ‘homely’ pub or ‘local’, a communal space echoing the earlier hospice. Alternatively, it might be characterised as getting ‘beneath the skin of the personal experience’ (Zelig, 2014, p. 166), where the affective process is emphasised over the cognitive. In the sense of the latter, Schultz speaks of the need for the reader ‘to flinch’ (Schultz, 2008, p. 116).

In thinking about hospitality, I’m interested in poetry’s capacity to invite close reading, with closeness sometimes becoming uncomfortably close. Indeed, it might be to the point of discomfort in testing porosity of the reader’s self. At the same time, I want to bring that paradoxically alongside a trope of distance. Just as Nelson turns to the Greek myth of the Argo, I want to introduce the figure of Penelope within the framework of a hospitable poetics. Penelope is the mythic figure who maintains faith in the return of her husband, Odysseus.

Weaving and reweaving, she undertakes textual strategies of endurance that keeps open the means for a glimpse of return, an encounter in whatever shape or form possible. The lyric poem, then, might accommodate a simultaneous emergence and annihilation of form, aligned with dementia's shifting between absence and presence. The poem holds affective promise as much as it holds affective trace. To sum up, the poem is, at once, that which may invade the reader's personal space but also holds persistence, if not hope, from afar.

In mapping out poetry and dementia, I want to extend the categories that Rüdiger Kunow (2015) applies in relation to Alzheimer's. One of Kunow's categories is poetry written by those with Alzheimer's with the help of persons beyond the family. This assisted creativity is typically a form of therapy. Lyric's significant aural dimension, as with music, has been used to stimulate collaborative improvisations. These are important for the recognition and celebration of ongoing personhood but sometimes risks reading the language of dementia 'as inherently poetic' (Swinnen, 2016, p. 1378). Another of Kunow's categories is poetry by writers with Alzheimer's. This is relatively rare and, as Kunow contends, 'almost always at a relatively early stage of cognitive impairment' (2015, p. 286). The stigma surrounding dementia is perhaps one reason why so few writers have admitted to such a condition. After a lifetime building a literary reputation, dementia threatens the symbolic capital accrued around mastery of the craft and may engender a sense of shame. While people beginning to write in assisted programs may find such experience to be generative, those who have established a career of writing may find it a far more frustrating, potentially terrifying experience of estrangement and loss of control.

One of the few poets to explore their own Alzheimer's was American Objectivist George Oppen, who began to show symptoms in 1977 but was not officially diagnosed until 1982. Oppen's poetics of attention include patterns of return and difference across his work. Yet, for Oppen, dementia was embarking on an 'unchosen / journey immense' in a world 'increasingly strange' ('The Tongues', 2002, p. 275). He would associate its state of wandering exile with his Jewish heritage, discerning displacement as occurring at the level of language: 'Too strange, all has become strange, all the words are not mine, nor am I the words' (qtd. in McMullan, 2016, p. 41). Gordon McMullan has criticised scholars for avoiding the potential impact of Alzheimer's on writers' work, arguing that Oppen's use of repetition, 'loose syntax, abstraction, wilfully non-linear facture' and 'fragmentation' is formally aligned with his condition (2016, p. 43). He and David Amigoni are particularly scathing of the concept of late style, arguing that it focuses on a small set of artistic geniuses who are somehow able to 'buck the trend in old age and find ... a new, transcendent form of expression that manages both to express a lifetime of creative experience and to look forward to forms of creative endeavour that are yet to come' (Amigoni and McMullan, 2019, p. 3).

Late style ignores dementia as a condition that is ordinary in impacting so many. Peter Nicholls has applied Theodor Adorno's definition of modernist late style to Oppen's work, noting how it is fragmentary, tends towards 'irascible gesture', and 'communicates ... like a cipher' through 'blank spaces' (p. 566). While I agree with McMullan's critique of late style's limitations, Nicholls' reading of poems like 'The Tongues' does take into account Oppen's navigation of Alzheimer's as well as reflections on his illness by Oppen's wife Mary. So, I wonder whether there might be a way in which late style could be made more democratic?

Could late style be reconceptualised and broadened to understand writing impacted by dementia?

Rather than dwell on this question, I want to move to Kunow's final category of dementia poetry, that is, poetry written by carers, most often family members. How might such poetry provide a means to ethically accommodate dementia and counter stigma? Rebecca Bitenc (2020) points out that 'dementia care is still predominantly carried out by women' (p. 3) and that much of the poetry on dementia is by women. While I have certainly found this to be the case, examples by men suggest that this gendering might be slowly changing. Considering the 2021 release of the final report on the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety in Australia, I want to focus predominantly on examples from Australia; however, I will start with a brief look at the hybrid work of American poet Susan M. Schultz's *Dementia Blog* (2008) and its sequel *She's Welcome to Her Disease* (2013). One of the very few writers to engage with dementia over a serial or long form, Schultz blends lyric with blog. Both forms assume a public address and personal voice. Following the blog's convention, Schultz's entries proceed from the most recent to the most dated, so that the reader is situated *in media res* in having to identify relationships and histories. This experience of confusion is similar to the confusion of the dementia patient.

Schultz describes how dementia creates a temporal in-between: 'Dementia offers us the conditional, the provisional tense, the not-present or not-past or not-future tense' (2014, n.p.). It is 'where the form and life collide' (Schultz, 2008, p. 105). While writing might be characterised as a 'memory box' (Schultz, 2008, p. 112), there remains a gap between 'this life' and 'this poem' (Schultz, 2008, p. 104). Accordingly, Schultz sought a form that might 'attend to [dementia's] repetitions, its failures of completion, its half-steps' (Schultz, 2008, p. 115). Crystal Yin Lie argues that 'dementia emerges as a heuristic device or aid for understanding and writing (life) history' (Lie, 2019, p. 67). Rather than an 'aid to memory', to borrow Lyn Hejinian's phrase (1996), it becomes an aid into what it means to forget, or to have meaning shift: 'This is my poem, my blog, my sad report ... I write because I do not understand. Writing fails to make it mean' (Schultz, 2008, p. 72). Elsewhere she writes:

Dementia is bricolage, is collage, is mixed-up syntax ... It cannot be analyzed, because its origins, and its ends, cannot be located. The maps are hanging from laundry lines in a humid country; the ink that is their roads has dripped off the dark paper that had enclosed them. (Schultz, 2008, p. 132)

The 'humid country' refers to being located in Hawai'i and foregrounds how geographic distance echoes a failure to be cognitively 'on the same page' as her mother. Schultz raises the ethics of writing about her mother's dementia and, by extension, of herself, her family, and the people around them:

This is about the problem of what is private and public, what ought not to be private and what is public, what ought not to be shared and what must be. The process is not fiction, but enactment. (Schultz, 2008, p. 48)

She also raises questions of 'appropriation' (Schultz, 2008, p. 64), re-assigning the zombie role to the writer who collects 'organs before a death' (Schultz, 2008, p. 92). Elsewhere she

considers *Dementia Blog* as an ‘easement’ over collective memory, foregrounding questions of property and use. She discerns that there is a loss of ownership or control once the *Blog* moves into the hands of the reader: ‘When the property is sold, it can no longer be taken as the story of her life, or of mine’ (Schultz, 2008, p. 48). Yet in thinking of her mother’s dementia as an easement, Schultz focuses on aspects of moving in and out of an area. This transforms the poem into a kind of commons where interactions can take place: ‘I mean to elide form into style, the style of our being conjoined with the form that describes us, and our going’ (Schultz, 2008, p. 64).

The sharing of hospitable space raises issues around the limits of ethical practice: ‘Ethics requires enough memory that forgetting is transgression’ (Schultz, 2008, p. 104). For Schultz kindness is not an ‘ethic, though we wish it were’ (2008, p. 104). Ethic, then, must be distinguished from emotion. She points out that empathy is challenged by difference yet is morally preferable than having none:

Better the sins of empathy than its lack. Key words in this text include: ‘privilege’, ‘gender’, ‘race’, ‘institutions’, ‘narcissism’. ‘Empathy’ must not elide any of these terms, for fear of their erasure. I must feel empathy only for my kind, lest I bend categories, ignore my privilege. (Schultz, 2008, p. 50)

Hospitality is characterised by presence. For Schultz, the poem of dementia ‘cannot reciprocate, even if it adds on. It is a labyrinth with no end, but many paths’; she adds that her mother ‘will take them all, and then take them again’ (Schultz, 2008, p. 100). Schultz considers the reader in navigating this labyrinth: ‘If dementia is endless repetition, then how to write it down without altering it, so that it is at once legible to the reader and varied enough for her to absorb it?’ (Schultz, 2008, p. 116). Schultz’s blog posts include short sections that are sometimes unconnected, sometimes folding back onto each other (Lie, 2019, p.63). She discerns that ‘where narration fails’ in *Dementia Blog*, ‘the lyric moment ... can still sustain its meaning’ (p. 115). The blog becomes a kind of ‘[r]everse Stein’ where ‘[n]othing accrues’ (p. 122). Here, Schultz echoes Shakespeare’s line, ‘Nothing will come of nothing’ from King Lear, often viewed as the prototype of dementia (Act 1. Scene 1). She also invokes W. H. Auden’s famous line, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, in signalling poetry’s capacity to reveal what might otherwise be disregarded as nothing (1940/n.d.). In *Dementia Blog*, meaning ‘happens only as instances of it tear apart’ (p. 122).

Turning to Australian writers, many focus on spatial displacement in a way that resonates with Oppen’s late work as much as with the work of Schultz. Alison Clark’s ‘Dementia’ (1994) refers to being ‘in a room in a city she’d lost the knack of / by visiting less often, till imperceptibly / it had become ... foreign’ (p. 107). One of the few to project the speaker into the position of the dementia sufferer, Kate Llewellyn’s poem ‘Travel’ (2004) draws attention to the spatial dynamics of memory and language: not only is it ‘like being in a madhouse [where] no one speaks your language’ but also there is ‘foaming from a cream / whose label was impossible to read’ (p. 37). She envisages being overwhelmed by the sense of ‘Nurses mocking you’ (p. 37). For Llewellyn, the process is like being on a train that ‘won’t stop until it reaches / its awful destination’ (p. 37). In contrast, Jessica L. Wilkinson’s ‘On Dementia’ (2010) positions the dementia figure as a still point while material objects in the world around

are ‘always moving’ (p. 9). Reduced to ‘fish eyes in a chair’, the figure is ‘lonely’ and powerless to move from its position in front of a ‘switched off’ television screen (p. 9). Wilkinson’s poem makes use of a surrealist poetics. It also recalls Emily Dickinson’s exploration of liminal states of otherness, not only through attention to change at the micro level of a fly, but also grammatically through a tactical use of dashes that underscores both fragmentation and possibility.

Having started with Nelson’s motif of the Argo, many dementia poems position the mobile subject on or in water. This emphasises a loss of solid ground, metamorphosis, and sometimes journeying. Significantly, water can emphasise a sense of distance between carer and the person with dementia. In ‘Elegy for My Father’ (1998), Philip Salom characterises his father’s presence as just beyond, ‘Something out there on the water’ (p. 259). Recalling childhood memories of fishing with his father, the speaker now fishes for signs of the father he once knew. Salom notes how the first signs of illness were when his father ‘drank the colours in transfusion’ (p. 259). Salom characterises the care of his mother as a form of devotion, noting how his mother forms a kind of merger with his father, to the point that his tears are accentuated by hers and his ‘memories leave [him] and enter her’. Everyday rituals of attending his father becomes linked to Communion, as his father’s self becomes, at times, ‘just an article of faith’ (p. 260). Salom contrasts the bedridden and contained figure of his father with a ‘single blossom’ that ‘floats across a saucer, slowly / to the other side ... except, by chance, / not symbolism’ (p. 262). Yet the speaker does desire symbolism, reading into it his father’s spirit moving beyond the body’s physical confines.

Tim Slade’s ‘Dementia-Deep’ (2020) also sees his grandfather’s dementia as creating a floating subject. Slade’s grandfather’s smile is ‘At the handsome shore’s / Crooked geology’. A phonetic slide enacts a continuous present: ‘Today / Those-days, / These days’ that is comforting and ‘Sea birds glide / Upon the forgetful / Breeze’ (p. 134). As with Salom’s poem, physical boundaries cannot contain its subject. Both Salom and Slade’s poems are meditative and accepting of the dementia subject; they are more traditionally consolatory. Jennifer Harrison situates her poem ‘Dementia’ (1996) at the seashore with shells likened to dementia refugees: ‘they wander through the wash’s lost strength’ (p. 54). Using the shell as a metaphor for both the poem and a home, she points to the portable nature of the shell and its capacity to be either embodied or empty:

It is a brief poem of sparse rhyme.
The boundaries are defiant
only in me.

Your body has outgrown
three languages: terza rima, science, memory:
let’s move to another town. (p. 55)

For Harrison, even if the poetic structure comes unfixed, a hospitable state may be found through prosody: ‘How the triolet ends I can’t tell / Alice Bentley, Alice Ware. / Repetitions weave a fixing spell’ (p. 54).

Other writers have turned to spaces such as gardens that are maintained space, not inside but also not an outside beyond reach. Yvette Holt writes of visiting her mother in an aged care home that is ‘distant’ from her Yiman roots in ‘Mother(s) Native Tongue’ (2018, n.p.). Spending time together in the home’s garden, Holt emphasises strict control of it as an environment, with its ‘manicured mattress of flora and fauna’. Her characterisation of it as a ‘garden playground’ with ‘crayon coloured [sic] flowers’ suggests infantilisation but also a space of stimulation. The garden encourages a heightened sensory engagement by the speaker and the possibility of metamorphosis: ‘my ears hunt for a serpent butterfly’. The search for it, ‘echoing in distress’, suggests a need to find discomfort yet it remains only within the speaker.

Noting that ‘my eyes miscarry’, Holt draws attention to questions of birthrights, and its loss. It is worth noting that dementia affects almost five times as many Aboriginal Australians from rural regions and remote communities as other Australians (Smith, 2007, p. 1). As the title suggests, Holt’s poem explores how many with dementia revert to one’s first language. Holt reverses the roles usually assigned to the carer as belonging and the person with dementia as displaced: ‘mother begins to scribble with her tongue in a language / I do not understand’. The speaker notes how she was never ‘offered’ her mother’s tongue and only occasionally ‘loaned’ an ‘aboriginal-english lingo’, a ‘concoction of bastardy words’. In spending time with her mother now, there is a ‘borrowed providence’. Both the mother’s return to her own language and the speaker’s emotions experience ‘spillage’. Holt reinforces this by having single words visually pour down the page, one per line that emphasises their isolation and lack of connection: ‘excitement / bewilderment / anger / frustration / confusion / laughter’ arriving at ‘i am jealous’. The final two words, ‘judgement’ and ‘confabulation’ return to the role of interpretation and the speaker’s speculation over the words’ meaning. It is significant that Holt does not replicate the Aboriginal words voiced by her mother so that the reader, too, is barred from them.

Dementia in Holt’s poem leads to an increased awareness of genealogy, the ‘history of the Letters’ connecting one to both ‘conversations of the deceased’ and ‘premonitions of the future’. She points to the causes of intergenerational loss, how her mother was forced to keep her language ‘in privacy’ and ‘without witness’ through being ‘forbidden to voice [it] / post 1945 (Woorabinda Settlement)’. Inhospitable, the State has disciplined her as a subject. To the poem’s speaker, her mother’s tongue is a ‘crossword dialect’ in the sense of being cryptic and unintelligible. As her mother’s ‘mind reclines into an abyss of natal sustenance’, her native language returns ‘piece by piece’. The speaker’s ‘desert fingers’ contrast with her mother’s ‘glossary so fertile’. The speaker exclaims her desire ‘to speak my mother’s tongue!’ The response, italicised, ‘i gave you all my stories’ emphasises a failure of transmission. There is illegibility with the sunlight ‘casting shadows over those handwritten notes’.

The poem situates the blossoming of her mother’s language alongside the garden’s blooming flowers, even though they are all non-native: ‘marigolds, snap-dragons, begonias, daffodils, / and blooming pansies’. While the speaker’s fingers ‘gently [sail] up and down the oars of their urban throats’: the speaker remains stuck. Holt’s poem ends by foregrounding how dementia patients are regulated, describing them in prison terms as ‘lifers’. She notes how ‘morning tea is now served in the adjacent dining room / the one without a garden view’. While her mother experiences partial freedom in the garden, she remains ‘dutiful’ in holding the hand of her daughter.

Sarah Holland-Batt's 'My Father as a Giant Koi' (2020) focuses on water as a space of simultaneous containment and freedom within the garden space. She characterises her father's life in a nursing home to being 'at the bottom of the pond' (p. 302). Using the metaphor of a fish signals his otherness but also that he is a sentient, active being. His repetitive movement is 'in currents only he can sense' as he 'perfect[s] the art of the circle'. Contrasting with the fish, Holland-Batt turns to the metaphor of a vehicle to foreground the mechanics of her father's orientation: 'He cannot trust the scratched headlamps of his eyes so he navigates by feel' (p. 302). This emphasises a cognitive lack of understanding or insight of the path ahead. The poem offers a strong example of paradoxical accommodation, presenting different ways of understanding dementia's embodiment. Within perceived limitation, there is dexterity, Holland-Batt celebrates her father's motor skill in likening him to 'a monorail' or 'an iceskater' (p. 302).

Like Holt's poem, Holland-Batt emphasises distance in proximity to dementia: 'His is so far beneath the green skin of duckweed / he cannot make me out, or I him' (p. 302). The enclosure of the garden pond is reinforced by poetic meter. As with Holt's poem, there is a likening of the nursing home to a prison: the 'spears of water hyacinth rising / around him like jail bars' (p. 302). The pond emphasises a world that has shrunk. At the same time, the shapeshifting nature and temporal suspension of her father gives him an almost mythic status; he becomes a 'giant' operating within an underworld. Again, this contrasts paradoxical accommodation. Holland-Batt describes how her father surfaces at mealtimes, taking a bite of food to materially 'find the world' that is 'solid as metal and bait' (p. 302). Like Holt's poem, Holland-Batt's suggests a kind of freedom occupied by the dementia person, but also that rituals like mealtimes sees them 'caught' and constrained within the discipline of the aged care home. Both Holt and Holland-Batt's poems are as much about the difficulty of attachment in the face of alienation. It is not coincidental that the koi fish symbolises love in Japanese culture.

While the father of Holland-Batt's poem is beyond language and the mother of Holt's returns to her first language, A. Frances Johnson and Hazel Smith have focused on the challenges of linguistic confusion. 'My Father's Thesaurus' (2020, n.p.) begins with Johnson's father's sudden incapacity to drive after a lifetime of doing so 'faultlessly'. The first sign comes at 'sundown' when the 'trees lit Magritte' and, like surrealism's collapse of distance, 'near and far merged'. Losing the capacity to steer through the world extends to the level of language as her father's words become 'a new Babel / of vigilant accountancies, cornball song, / plant catalogues, expletives, and chess moves'. When a saying from her father's childhood, 'banks could not be trusted', is transformed into 'the banks were past the mustard' at the dinner table, it is treated as a family joke. Yet, as further 'blended agendas' occur, uneasiness ripples through the family. Where her father's words once preserved order and are 'neat as jam jars, / the fruity, sunny order of Fowlers Vacola', there is increasing word jamming. The jamming occurs with increased stubbornness, an insistence, for instance, that 'all cows ate gravel' rather than 'all cows ate grass'. Reading a musical score also becomes difficult, with the 'random dots' likened to 'rainspots'. This results in a synesthetic behavioural shift: 'You watched the piano and played the sunset'.

The emergence of irritation sees 'random hatred' and suspicion 'disfigure old kindness'. Johnson explores the family's need to accommodate and become 'codebreakers', the struggle

of ‘fighting through thickets of translation’. An eventual car accident symbolises a linguistic and cognitive crash, as ‘words collided around / your head like trams not yet waited for’. Accommodation means secrets: the failed driver’s test is kept hidden in the glovebox. Yet the poem concludes with a recognition that alternative accommodation is required. Out of hospital and back in the living room, her father is unable to recognise the family dog and the intimate has become strange. He turns his daughter’s hand ‘as if he wanted to test it, detach it and send it / whirring into the cold, free universe’.

Similar to Johnson, Hazel Smith shifts between humour and concern over the slide in language in her poem ‘Tennis Court Ode’ (2016). Like ‘My Father’s Thesaurus’, Smith’s poem tracks the gradual display of dementia: ‘that which is salient ... is usually that which is hidden’ (p. 30). Playing with a tennis motif, she notes how ‘you can join in any conversation without really knowing the score’ (p. 30). Symptoms like irascibility emerge slowly such that ‘as dementia starts to cut its teeth, secrets begin to throw racquets’ (p. 30). Smith also highlights the confusion over words with ‘oath’ mutating to ‘ode’ and words assumed and discarded: ‘she took the headscarf on and off unsure about metaphor’s limits’ (p. 30). Expected roles also transform: ‘the doctor talks and talks though he’s taken an oath to listen’. The poem concludes with a remark by the person with dementia: ‘he’s the John Ashbery of tennis’ (p. 30).

Smith’s poem invokes John Ashbery’s ‘Tennis Court Oath’ which explores the cognitive disjunction and mood shifts of a patient who may have dementia: ‘I go on loving you like water yet there is a terrible breath in all of this / You were not elected President yet won the race’ (Ashbery, 1957/n.d.). Ashbery also includes linguistic difficulty: ‘the coasts / stammered with unintentional villages’. In her poem, Smith transposes Ashbery’s surreal alienation to an Australian context and its heightened policing of border, as ‘miscarrying vessels’ enact ‘people-smuggling poetics’ (Smith, 2016, p. 30). Yet she questions ‘the anxiety of influence’ as well as ‘the passivity anxiety breeds’ (p. 30) and suggests that a reader must be alert to culturally specific nuance.

‘Mix-Ups’, a further poem in Smith’s *Word Migrants* (2016), takes its epigraph from a sign in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco: ‘Culturally, no “Asia” exists, and the peoples who inhabit “Asia” often have little in common with each other’ (p. 45). Dementia, Smith suggests, is a similar umbrella term covering vast difference. The second epigraph reads: ‘Philosophically, there is no definitive blue; the sky is always salted with clouds. // Chronically, we sort words into piles, stitch up the scattered mess of the senses’ (p. 45). Again, she suggests that there is no definitive dementia, only a yearning for one in light of the human drive for order. As a poem, ‘Mix-ups’ shifts typographically between fonts as well as between prose and lyric. Smith considers how the dementia patient shifts between fluency and stutter, how she ‘feels connected to her visitors, but doesn’t know how they related to her or to each other’ (p. 45). Smith continues:

She keeps saying she is sad because she hasn’t had any babies.

They retort, again and again, we are your babies. She says, I think I’ll adopt one, and they laugh and throw it back, how could you adopt one when you need people to look after *you*?

Smith communicates the intensity of emotion around the dementia person's distorted perception: 'She weeps and weeps saying her father has just died. He is in the next room and she has neglected him' (p. 46). Thinking that she 'lives upstairs', the space of dementia becomes one of improvisation: 'the habitual is crooked' (p. 46). 'Mix-Ups' foregrounds the uneven movement between regression and progression, as the person with dementia counters the judgement that 'she will never learn anything new again' by doing 'better in her memory test' (p. 46). As with the trope of water in other dementia poems, Smith turns to soup as both a space to float but also to consume and nourish. She notes how a dementia patient will approach a 'soup of ideas' affectively and 'pick the most aromatic pare them down until you reach the core grows smaller disappears have to call it back by pulling it on its fragrance' (p. 46). And in a 'soup of illusions', the dementia patient will 'pick out the mongrel looks like you lower her voice grainy rough resistant' (p. 46). Accommodation here is a process of selection through other means. Yet while dementia might be a 'soup of impossibilities' in which the dementia patient may stir 'inter-stellar stardust', there is just as much likelihood that the dementia patient will 'snap the ladle' as 'soup is about to be served' (p. 46).

'Mix-Ups' explores the loss of narrative logic. There is the sense of a murder having occurred, but the details remain 'pale and vague' (Smith, 2016, p. 47). While she believes, 'It had happened ... everything suggested it hadn't'. The speaker then believes that a woman is offering her a child that she must refuse 'because I knew I had killed': 'If you have killed you can't look after a child, everyone knows that' (p. 47). The poem inverts the discussion of having a child at the beginning, contrasting care with killing. The poem concludes: 'Sharp and vague, this sense of loss, this sense of connection' (p. 47).

Extending Gordon McMullan's suggestion that engagements with the late work of poets should not presume a transhistorical or transcultural framework, I would argue that part of a hospitable poetics is an awareness of the situatedness of dementia even as it may seem increasingly unclear. The eponymous thesaurus of Johnson's poem is more of a Melways or local dictionary as Johnson's poem navigates a Melbourne geography of trams and brand names like Fowlers Vacola. It is a Depression-era phrase, 'banks could not be trusted', that is taken apart and recombined. A further poem by Sarah Holland-Batt, 'In My Father's Country' (2018), attempts to locate her father through the geographies of his past. Her poem captures the bleakness of the search in the Yorkshire landscape, its 'map of burrs, places you have clung, the briar patch' (p. 22). Yet there is 'no symbology of run and henge, I can read here in the dark' (p. 22). While her father invents a history that 'half the family was British raj', the 'true origins are lost for good' and she is left to speculate on 'a gap I alchemised' (p. 22). The affective distance is registered as coldness. Yet ironically, this gives her an affinity with her father sleeping as a child on the frozen front lawn during the war. Similarly, Salom's elegy recalls how his father's memories of war in Syria combine with tricks of light while he is more conscious of 'boots smelling of pennyroyal' (Salom, 1998, p. 260).

It is worth considering how the form of these poems on dementia inform the reading experience. Smith's 'Mix-Ups' is not an easy poem to follow. The connection between the sections isn't clear; for the reader too, details are 'pale and vague'. The use of prose promises narrative but it is one that is full of holes; likewise, grammar goes missing. The lines in Holt's 'Mother(s) Native Tongue' are irregular and Holt eschews capitalisation. Form follows her

frustration and anger in springing out of control. Alternatively, Holland-Batt and Johnson's poems have regular line lengths and comply with the rules of grammar. The form of the poem becomes another kind of room, a means to grapple with dementia but perhaps also a means to compartmentalise feeling. Poems like Salom's 'Elegy for My Father' enact release in the final moments of his father's life: 'We love you. Go safely now. Go'. (p. 263). The poem reaches an acceptance of death and separation. This is not the case in 'Diary of an Anti-Elegist' (2016, n.p.), a further poem by Amanda Johnson. As each stanza raises then rejects the prospect of consolation, the refrain insists 'no, not yet'.

The case studies in this essay demonstrate how dementia is historically and culturally shaped, and intimately lived. Poetry, like any literary form, can still replicate the dominant discourse around dementia. Yet, as Schultz suggests, it can also provide a means to 'listen to what is there instead of what we want to be there', enabling us to see individuals with dementia 'more as themselves and less as what we most fear about ourselves' (2014, para 15). An accommodation of dementia is one which recognises personhood, agency and freedom while acknowledging that a hospitable poetics may be precarious and difficult. In its navigation of how one connects and the possible continuation of attachment, poetry provides a valuable means to remove the stigma surrounding dementia and to reach beyond narratives that alienate dementia from social citizenship.

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