



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia

ISSN: 1838-8973

ISSUE DOI: 10.54375/001/pjldc45v90

# OUT OF THE ORDINARY ON POETRY AND THE WORLD

Editor: Jen Webb



**Image:** Robert Delaunay, *Rythme N.1*, 1938, 529 x 592cm, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Public Domain



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/jq1bslzb

**Keywords:** introduction, editorial, poetry

## EDITORIAL

Jen Webb

*University of Canberra*, ORCID: 0000-0003-4912-7021

## EDITORIAL

Jen Webb

In December 2022, Paul Magee (University of Canberra) and SJ Burton (ANU) convened a conference titled *Out of the Ordinary: On Poetry and the World*. The call for papers asked the questions: ‘How do poems relate to the world they proceed from or create? What is the world of the poem?’ Over a period of three days, a rich menu of papers, performances and readings saw delegates respond to this provocation, exploring both the composition and the analysis of poetry in various modes and forms, from various perspectives and disciplinary traditions. The papers included in this issue of *Axon: Creative Explorations* are all authored by conference delegates, and provide a flavour of the event as a whole. We are grateful to all delegates, and all who organised and supported the work of that conference, held at the University of Canberra campus; and we acknowledge with respect the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal people.

Despite many attempts over many decades, it is difficult to point to a single straightforward definition of poetry; but perhaps the most often cited phrase is that it is the use of language and prosody to stir the imagination and the emotions; to concentrate one’s awareness of experience. Both framings – imagination/emotion, and concentrated awareness – feature in the essays including in this issue. And, given that this issue is both the product of a poetry conference, and focuses entirely on poetry, a number of the contributions are combinations of poetic sequences (in text, images and film) and short contextualising essays. Attention is given to poetry directed at social or political change; poetry emerging on new platforms, in new relationships or for new audiences; and the exploration of various modes of writing.

Speaking of attention: something many poets, philosophers, and analysts have expressed over many years is the role poetry plays as an affordance for sustained and selective attention to the world. Lucy Alford’s *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020) sets out various ways in which poetry can function to tune readers’ attention not merely to the poem, but also to its content, or to associated and loosely affiliated issues – a tuning of our perception. Elder Olson, writing on the work of William Empson, describes the operations of poetry in ‘the focusing of our attention’, adding that ‘clearly the direction of attention is of great importance’ (1950: 248). In each of the works included in this issue, there are strong indications of close and sustained attention being paid to the art and the analysis, to the writing and the contexts in which writing happens.

Attention is central to **Oz Hardwick**’s discussion of ekphrasis. Moving through realism, perception, and the encounter between self and other, he sets out a persuasive argument that attention to the fleeting, the minor and the fragmentary is of more value in the writing of poetry than is the focused attention called for by scientists and analysts. **Hazel Smith** and **Sieglinde Karl-Spence** seem to gesture to a similar concern in their contribution, which is comprised of extracts from a major work of images and poetry. In collages that include recovered family photographs and scraps of text, they demonstrate the value of fragments in the exploration of memory. Fragments also build the foundation for **Axel-Nathaniel Rose**’s exploration of the world of Tumblr, where poetry lives largely in the form of utterances and citations. His investigation provides a heartening account of how efficacious poetry can be outside the mainstream, and its value to those who may not otherwise identify themselves as poets or poetry critics.

Both **Anne Carson** and **Emilie Collyer** take up the issue of feminist voices in poetry. Carson presents a sequence of her biographical poems on George Sand, alongside an explication of what she terms ‘restitution poetics’: a practice that aims to infuse the poems with elements that draw attention to literary women’s lineage. Collyer’s focus is on contemporary women practitioners and their knowledge and experience, which she presents through poems that trace the threads of her research interviews, and reflections of what means to be a creative woman in contemporary Australia. **Claire Gaskin** too takes a political position in her essay on the affordances of poetry for articulating and mirroring the experience of trauma, and for supporting the long process of not just surviving trauma but also learning to ‘build a liveable world’.

**Susan Hawthorne**’s poems and associated commentary hone in on the ‘otherworldly’ experience of epileptic seizures. She writes what generally seems to be ‘the unwritable’, demonstrating how creativity can emerge from the most difficult and demanding of situations. **Andraya Stapp-Gaunt**’s essay and film address trauma. She draws on feminist multispecies theory and Indigenous epistemology to frame and explicate her work on rabbit/human relatedness, arguing for the importance of attending, viscerally, to those who share this planet with us. **Rose Lucas** considers the embodied properties of poetry – particularly lyric poetry, and particularly those poems that make use of the white space of the page to reflect the ‘experience of the respiring body’. Here she observes the central role of attention and contemplation in the production of poetry that collapses the space between subject and object, self and other.

**Jake Goetz** explores long (and long-process) serial poetry, specifically Laurie Duggan’s *Blue Hills* which he characterises as an anti-epic, anti-mythic approach to poetry, and one that enables a reevaluation of settler myths. **Owen Bullock** addresses the long poem, in this case what he terms ‘fusion poetry’. For this hybrid form, he builds on his earlier experiments with haibun, now blending linear and prose poetry, haiku, tanka and found material in an attempt to reflect the multiplicity of information inputs we experience in contemporary society. **Grant Caldwell** too finds insights in the connections between cultural forms and values. In this case, it is a homology between the traditional Japanese haiku and Indigenous Australian concepts of Country, where the search for ‘grounded truths’ in each can be seen reflected in the contemporary attention for care for the environment he identifies in Australian haiku writing.

**Miriam Wei Wei Lo**, in a lively discussion on stresses and scansion, also calls for attention: specifically, attentiveness to metre and rhythm, and ‘consciousness of the things we intuitively enact with our words and voices’ in English poetry, and perhaps more so in *english* poetry: writings from beyond the mainstream of received articulation and expression, writing from englishes that function for different cultural contexts. **Katharine Coles**’ illuminating account of Black American poetry develops this issue more specifically, in presenting a record of a community of poets who have, on the whole, been set outside the mainstream, largely neglected by (white) literary history. Her essay critically engages the failures of what she names the ‘dominant poetic culture’ to read, engage with, and acknowledge these works.

Together, these contributions offer some answers to the questions that kickstarted their process: ‘How do poems relate to the world? What is the world of the poem?’ I turn finally to Tracy K Smith (US Poet Laureate 2017–2019), who says, in a conversation with Casey Rocheteau about poetry and the everyday world:

The way I like to understand what poems do, and what they offer, is that they bring us very close to what we knew before we forgot it. Poems are attempting to bring into familiar language the largeness and the strangeness of being alive. (in Rocheteau 2015)

### Works Cited

Alford, Lucy 2020 *Forms of Poetic Attention*, New York: Columbia University Press

Olson, Elder 1950 William Empson, contemporary criticism and poetic diction, *Modern Philology* 47.4 (May): 222–52

Rocheteau, Casey 2015 Tracy K. Smith: No secrets; A conversation (1 April), *Barnes and Noble Review*, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/tracy-k-smith-no-secrets> (accessed 25 March 2016)

---

### About the author

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice, and Interim Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. Her research and practice address creativity, representation and material poetics. Recent publications include the edited volume *Publishing and Culture* (with D Baker and DL Brien, CSP 2019), *Gender and the Creative Labour Market* (with S Brook, Palgrave, 2022), and the poetry collections *Moving Targets* (Recent Work Press, 2018) and *Flight Mode* (with S Hawke, Recent Work Press, Oct 2020). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus* and the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/ugvb5hdw7o  
Keywords: poetry, ekphrasis, artwork

# NOT PAYING ATTENTION

## Fast and loose ekphrasis

Oz Hardwick

*Leeds Trinity University*

### **Abstract**

This hybrid critical/creative paper addresses ekphrasis in an age characterised by short attention spans. It suggests that while ekphrasis is generally considered as arising from a poet's close attention to an artwork – the product of what psychologist Daniel Kahneman terms System 2 perceptions that require time – and can in turn prompt the reader to return to an artwork with heightened attention, it can also represent the fleeting glimpse that characterises much of our sensory experience of the world around us and, indeed, art. Considering Owen Bullock's idea of 'radical ekphrasis' in relation to Kahneman's category of System 1 perceptions – that is, immediate response to stimuli – this paper explores the possibilities of an ekphrasis of the transitory and concludes with an example thereof.



## NOT PAYING ATTENTION: FAST AND LOOSE EKPHRASIS

Oz Hardwick

Not my best side, I'm afraid.  
The artist didn't give me a chance to  
Pose properly. (Fanthorpe 1986: 28–29, lines 1–3)

As a university Creative Writing lecturer, one of my go-to poems when introducing the idea of ekphrasis to new students is UA Fanthorpe's 'Not My Best Side'. There are a number of reasons for this. First, it's witty, which always helps when one has just thrown in a new and potentially unnerving term like 'ekphrasis'. Secondly, it has an appealingly subversive edge, undermining the subject of Paolo Uccello's *St George and the Dragon* (c.1470, National Gallery, London), a painting that depicts a story with which most students will be at least passingly familiar. In doing so, the text demonstrates how painting and poem, past and present, may engage in dialogue about contemporary concerns, specifically relating to constructions of gender in this case, with the 'boy ... wearing machinery' (line 29) coolly mocked, for all his bluster and self-importance, by a clear-headed girl who, it is clear, would be quite capable of rescuing herself should the need arise. Less obviously – but in a way perhaps most importantly – beyond the interlinked monologues expressing the inner lives of the three curiously static figures depicted, the poem addresses the painting *as* a painting: for example, the painter's 'obsession with / Triangles' (lines 4–5; note the deft creation of expectation in the line break, which is resolved neither narratively nor thematically, but with an observation concerning form), or the perceived shortcomings of St George's horse's 'deformed neck and square hoofs' (line 12).

What is so significant about this last aspect, I think, is that it introduces students to what for many of them can be a rather unfamiliar activity: paying attention beyond the synoptic glance; looking at a still image not only in terms of the subject depicted, but also in terms of exactly *how* that subject is depicted – the formal considerations, how 'realistically' the artist has posed his subjects, the dispositions of shape and colour. Anecdotally, this may be considered unusual, because, as a culture, we are frequently characterised by short – and ever-shortening – attention spans;<sup>1</sup> and on visiting the National Gallery, or the Louvre, or the Uffizi, one will most likely encounter people spending longer reading the description of a work than actually looking at it or, in the case of the most famous works, jostling for selfies with them as if the paintings were celebrities, largely oblivious to considerations of whether or not the artist gave the subjects chance to pose properly (1). The viewer's personal proximity – and indeed the record of that proximity, to be shared instantly on social media – is, it seems, much more important than anything beyond the bare surface of any work. So this crash course in paying attention can be very valuable as students begin to learn the craft of ekphrastic writing.

This is, of course, equally true of all kinds of writing, and early on in most Creative Writing guides there will be the recommendation to pay attention to one's surroundings with heightened attention in order to be able to bring it to life for a reader. As Julia Bell notes:

Beginning to write is a process of learning to look at the world differently. To be able to construct vivid, believable narratives a writer needs to develop a sharp eye for the details in the world around them, details that are often easy to miss in the hustle and bustle of everyday living. (2001: 20)



1 The contemporary gallery experience. Photograph by author

This calls to mind ekphrasis in its original classical sense of being a vivid description, not necessarily of a work of art, but of any thing, scene, person, or event, whether real or imagined. Essentially, it is the act of speaking/telling (Greek *phrassein*) out (*ek*) (Cheeke 2008: 19), creating something vividly real for the reader. But what *is* vividly real? For all the experiments and adventures of the past century or so, Realism remains the dominant literary (not to mention filmic, televisual, etc.) mode in our society, from the sustained popularity of serialised narrative 'soap operas' to the commercial dominance of crime fiction among literary genres; but generations of experimentation by modernist and postmodernist writers and artists have nonetheless at very least highlighted the subjective nature of individual experience and its articulation.<sup>2</sup> As Catherine Belsey observes, 'Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar', going on to note that 'literary realism ... constructs its signifieds out of juxtapositions of signifiers which are intelligible not as direct reflections of an unmediated reality but because we are familiar with the signifying systems from which they are drawn, linguistic, literary, and semiotic' (Belsey 2002: 40). Realism in the arts, we may safely say, is an ordered representational system that bears very little relation to how individually we experience our day to day reality.

I make this ostensible digression because, as noted above, the 'reality' of our daily experience of the world around us very rarely involves paying close attention to things unless we are specifically guided to do so. While I do not for a moment suggest that writers should not cultivate the habit of attention, I would however suggest that there is a case to be made for also embracing the glimpse, the skim, and the barely registered impressions from which most of our sensory encounters are comprised and which make up the greater part of our experience of the

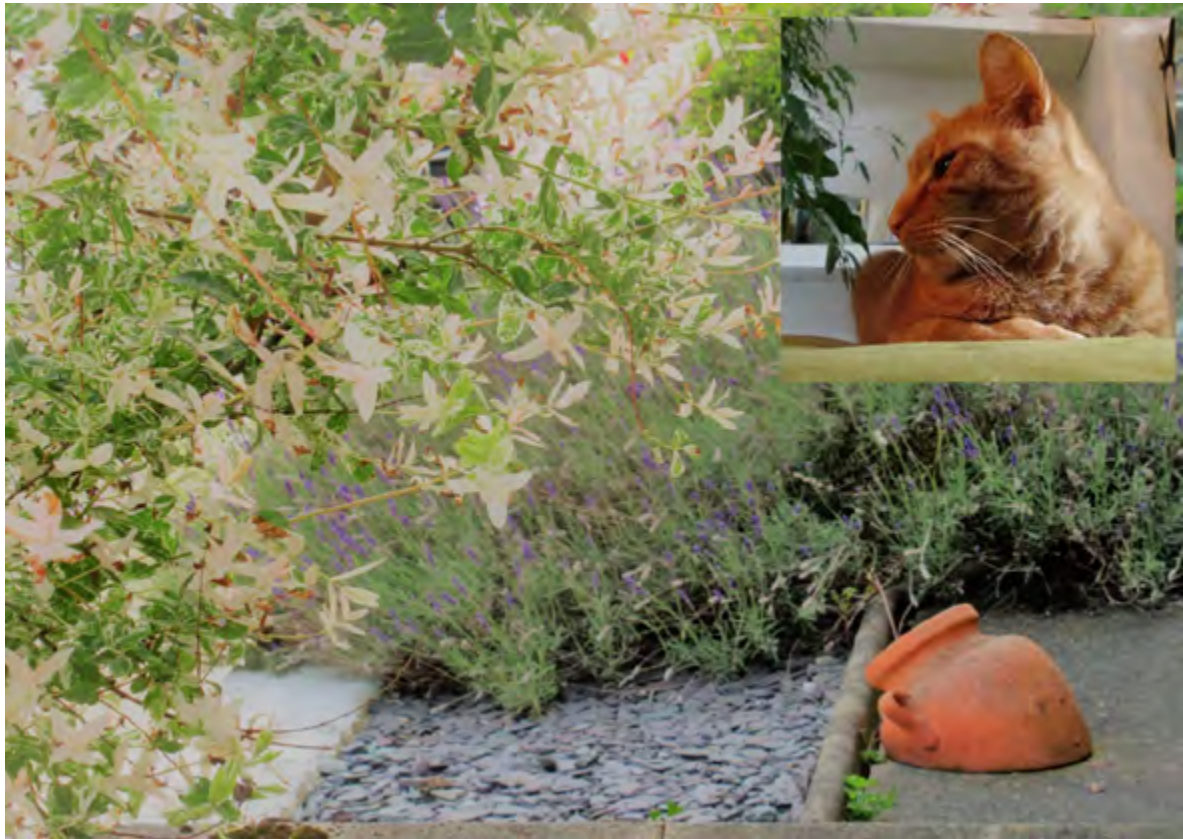


'real'. Virginia Woolf memorably observed that 'life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (Woolf 1925: 150). She was writing specifically of the material for narrative fiction here, but I think there is something to be gained for writers of all kinds by looking into this luminous halo and from time to time acknowledging the fleeting moths and dust motes that we generally pass without thinking.

The psychologist Daniel Kahneman, in his illuminating – and refreshingly readable – *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) characterises our perceptions, and our responses to these perceptions, into what he terms System 1 and System 2. To grossly simplify these terms, the former is our immediate response to stimuli, which may often appear instinctive or even go unnoticed altogether, whereas the latter is the focused, effortful attention – the 'slow thinking' of the book's title – which consciously interprets, questions, and rationalises. Our default setting, notes Kahneman, is to let System 1 just get on with things whenever possible. 'Many people are,' he notes, 'prone to place too much faith in their intuitions. They apparently find cognitive effort at least mildly unpleasant and avoid it as much as possible' (2011: 45). This explains the previously noted need to learn the discipline of paying close attention to artworks. At the same time, it may also appear to suggest that we habitually miss a lot as we avoid making strenuous mental effort unless we really have to. This, however, is not exactly the case, and Kahneman memorably characterises our base level System 1 operation as 'a machine for jumping to conclusions' (2011: 85): through an automatic and effortless process of 'associative activation' – that is, we automatically look for, and supply, a connection that links discrete and perhaps unrelated perceptions – we impose a coherent causal narrative on our surroundings by which we navigate our place in the world (2011: 51). One result of this is that 'the tendency to see patterns in randomness is overwhelming' (2011: 117).

Although Kahneman is here referring to patterns of probability, the phenomenon is also equally true when it comes to visual or other sensory stimuli. I am particularly fascinated by pareidolia, that phenomenon by which we interpret vague or random stimuli as a pattern or image of something that is not there: the casually draped coat becomes a figure in the dimly-lit room, or wood grain takes on the appearance of a face (Robson 2014; Alyal & Hardwick 2020). When confronted with visual ambiguities, we interpret them as things that we are used to seeing: at least once a week, I will catch a glimpse of a terracotta plant pot in a neighbour's front garden and see it as a ginger cat, even though it has been there for years and I know it is a plant pot (2). No doubt this is in no small part because I have a cat of a similar colour and have no interest in gardening. Also, as Kahneman observes, there is evidence to suggest that people more readily believe first impressions 'when they are tired and depleted', and it is worth noting that I always make my plant pot/cat misidentification first thing in the morning as I leave for work, still not fully awake and with all of my more complex System 2 thinking focused on the day ahead.

This second apparent digression brings us back to ekphrasis. John Hollander usefully posits a distinction between 'actual' ekphrasis, for which a work of art provides the source, and 'notional' ekphrasis, in which the subject is imagined and only comes into being, as it were, through language. Although subsequent studies have developed Hollander's distinctions – Peter Barry, for example, writes of 'conceptual' ekphrasis to refer to poetry that addresses works that are not only imaginary, but also could not possibly have existed – it remains a useful broad distinction (Barry 2002: 156), against which we can consider ekphrastic practice.



2 Common misperception when not paying attention. *Photographs by author.*

David Kennedy, following Mack Smith, sees in ekphrasis, ‘the performance of a complex temporal relationship’ between work(s), writer, and reader. The ekphrastic work is an incomplete – and ‘unfinishable’ – encounter, which is not merely a static translation from one medium into another, but is of itself necessarily open, both drawing upon the past and anticipating possible futures: it is both dynamic and transitory (Kennedy 2012: 3). Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington define this atemporal encounter as the ‘*ekphrastic space*’ (2023: 88; emphasis in original), which occurs as the poet simultaneously moves towards and steps away from the initiating artwork, thus opening up ‘a truly liminal and transitional space where past assumptions and expectations do not necessarily hold and where outcomes, poetic or otherwise, are not known’ (Atherton & Hetherington 2023: 90). The dynamism and continuous motion within this ‘space where the poet may not hope to fully interpret or re-represent an artwork but may contrive to yoke two (or more) nodes of perception into a new poetic formulation’ (2023: 90), I think speaks more broadly to the way we generally view works of art or, indeed, most of what happens around us, in that, however attentive we may be, our perception is always inevitably partial and selective. Even if, in an art gallery, we are focused upon, say, a painting, we will probably only see certain aspects of it – the Mona Lisa’s eyes and mouth, Uccello’s awkwardly-posed dragon, or any of the given work’s more noted or notable features – and our attention is rarely so concentrated, being so often drawn to things other than the work before which we stand: the shuffling bank of smartphone screens, perhaps, or even a ceramic urn that looks like a cat ... Because most of the time we are not paying attention: we are walking through Woolf’s ‘luminous halo’, creating, as we have seen, our own associative coherence from the artwork and its many overlapping contexts and intertexts, present, remembered, and imagined.

Acknowledging this complex – and unpredictable – act of creation in simply looking surely problematises the idea of ekphrasis, the logical conclusion being that all ekphrastic writing is both ‘actual’ and ‘notional,’ while never wholly either. Ekphrasis, as Atherton and Hetherington observe, can provide ‘opportunities for writers to suggest new or different ways of viewing an artwork (or artworks) or reading their own texts that may not fully conform to pre-conceived expectations of an ekphrasis’ (Atherton & Hetherington 2023: 84). For instance, the previously mentioned uncertainty around the act of seeing complements a recent discussion by Owen Bullock (2019), in which he raises the problem of understanding ekphrasis as a ‘point of stillness’ . . . whose subject is ‘still, objectified’, rather than dynamic.<sup>3</sup> Bullock responds to the implicit challenge by employing what he terms ‘radical ekphrasis’: that is a poetic that engages not only with an artefact. He presents the results of his encounters with journalism and installations – alongside more traditional ‘actual’ and ‘notional’ ekphrastic subjects – through language, but also through consciously allowing medium to dictate form. The lineage of such an approach may be traced to Apollinaire’s calligrams (1918), in which the prominent art critic sought to replicate the effects of contemporary Cubist painting in his poetry (Scobie 1997: 136). As Katherine Shingler has noted, ‘At the heart of Apollinaire’s poetic project is the desire to play down or minimize the distinction between reading and viewing, to bring the two processes into closer contact’ (Shingler 2011: 67), demanding the reader’s ‘*simultaneous awareness of textual and visio-spatial elements*’ (Shingler 2011: 70; emphasis in original). Subsequent writers have taken this further, demanding more of the reader/viewer through abandoning textual syntax and ‘commit(ing) completely to visual form as the basic structuring device of the poem’ (Scobie 1997: 136).

Bullock’s poems are very much a part of this tradition. However, in pointedly applying this approach to ekphrasis, the reader/viewer is charged not only with responding simultaneously to both text and form, but also with invoking the absent artwork/object, thus emphasising the irretrievable *pastness* of the initiating encounter with the poem’s subject. The resulting poems are challenging and excitingly open-ended, eschewing the effects of what, however well written, can too often become a rather sterile exercise in descriptive translation. In one poem extract (3), written in response to Xu Zhen’s 2013 installation *Play201301*, which resembles a suspended Gothic cathedral constructed of black leather and BDSM accessories, we see the poem, as Bullock puts it, ‘sculpted, to mimic the castle, which [he] called a citadel’, while also mirroring the shape of one of the D-rings to which it refers.

Bullock’s responses are thoughtful, and clearly the product of careful consideration of content and media; but what if we take this a stage further, acknowledging that our attention is fleeting and that, in most of our encounters, the work is part seen, part imagined, part predicted, and only part of what we see? For even if we are writing in the presence of an artwork, the act of writing takes place always before or after the experience of looking, temporally out-of-step and altering our view with each glance, subverting the very notion of ‘speaking out in full’.

If, then, we wish to bring our encounters alive to a potential reader, I would suggest that perhaps, paradoxically, the last thing we should be doing is offering the kind of detailed/focused response that the term ekphrasis has come to mean. Rather than, in Bell’s words, looking for the details ‘that are often easy to miss in the hustle and bustle of everyday living’ (Bell 2001: 20), perhaps we could instead allow the daily hustle and bustle to become part of our ekphrastic approach. To return to the points made by Kennedy, and Atherton and Hetherington, we should perhaps embrace the incomplete and unfinishable nature of both

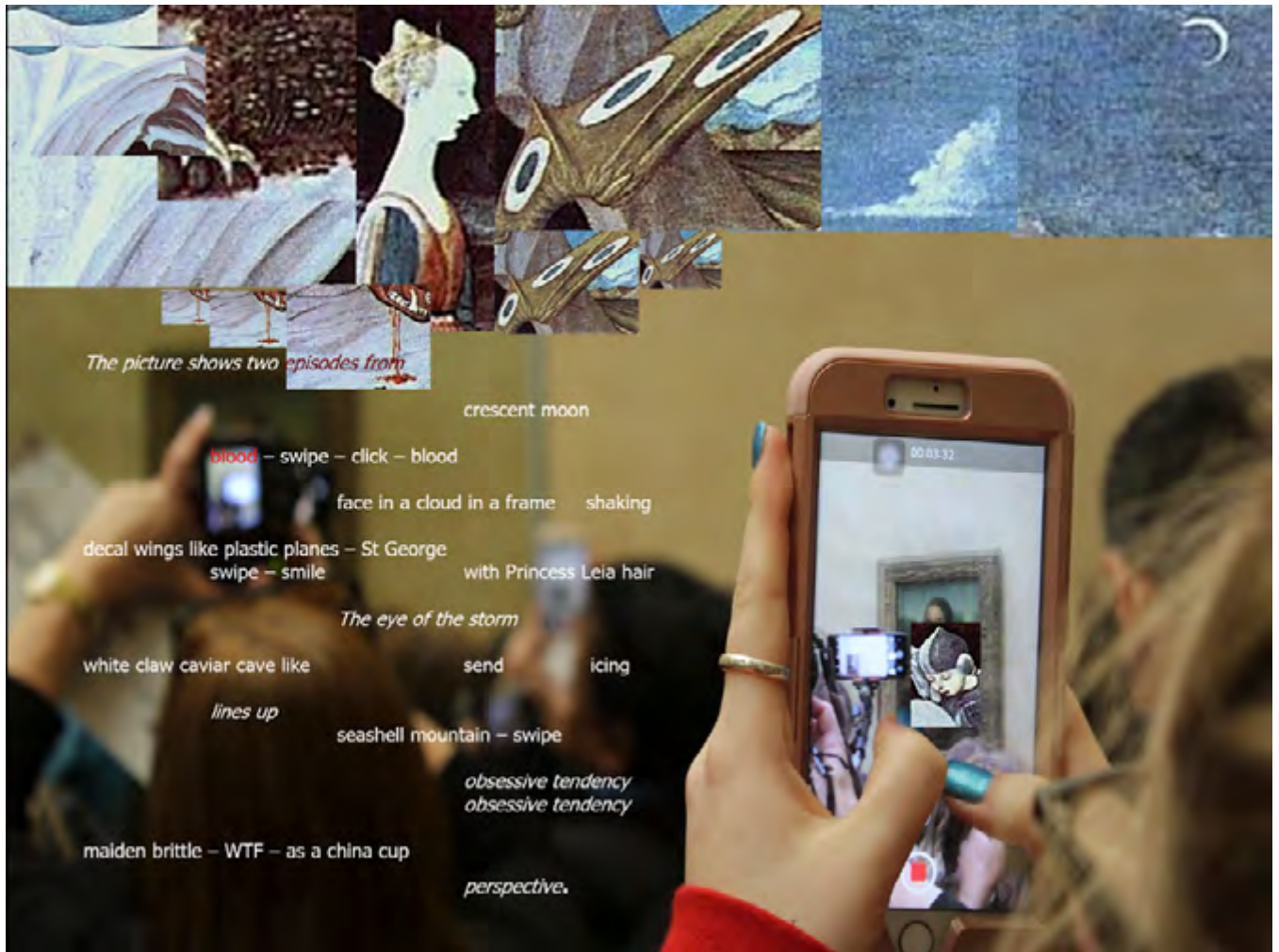
the castle  
hangs in the air  
a studded abyss  
D-rings  
an exterior surface  
that won't let you in  
spikes keep off  
a padded seat  
but no sitting  
the citadel  
empty

3 Owen Bullock (2018), response to Xu Zhen's *Play201301*

looking and our responses to looking. Rather than paying close attention to the subject, we could then consciously and actively accept the fragmentary, inattentive glance which informs our System 1 thinking, pointedly acknowledging the fleeting ephemerality of perception; and, in so doing, we could embrace the 'true liminality' of the space between object and response (Atherton & Hetherington 2023), in order to shape an ekphrastic mode in tune with the reality/realities of our information-saturated age.

In this spirit, I would like to conclude with an ekphrastic poem of my own which, rather than being written in response to a single artwork, was written in response to three items I consulted briefly in quick succession – not giving them 'a chance to /Pose properly' – in completing this article: the image of Uccello's *St George and the Dragon* and descriptive notes from the National Gallery website, the photograph reproduced above which I had taken on my last visit to the Louvre, and the extract of Owen Bullock's poem also reproduced above in order to exemplify his idea of 'radical ekphrasis'. I offer first an approximate visual representation of the manner in which these only partially registered – fragmentary, even – stimuli superimposed themselves upon each other to give rise to the poem (4), before concluding with the poem itself.





4 Not paying attention. Collage by author.

**before/after Uccello's *St George & the Dragon*<sup>4</sup>**

*The picture shows two episodes from*

crescent moon

blood – swipe – click – blood

face in a cloud in a frame      shaking

decal wings like plastic planes – St George

swipe – smile

with Princess Leia hair

*The eye of the storm*

white claw caviar cave like      send      icing

*lines up*

seashell mountain – swipe

*obsessive tendency*

*obsessive tendency*

maiden brittle – WTF – as a china cup

*perspective.*



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While such claims are largely anecdotal, recent research suggests a connection between increased internet usage and ‘collective attention span’. See Josh A Firth, John Torous, and Joseph Firth (2020).
- <sup>2</sup> A concern dating back at least to the 18th century, with a prime concern throughout the nine volumes of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67), is the impossibility of writing fully of a life.
- <sup>3</sup> Bullock (2019) refers to James Francis (2009) and Ruth Webb (2009).
- <sup>4</sup> Italicised lines taken from <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/paolo-uccello-saint-george-and-the-dragon> (accessed 7 July 2022).

## Works cited

- Alyal, Amina and Oz Hardwick 2020 Summoning ghosts and releasing angels: Challenging the tyranny of the blank page, *Writing in Practice* 6: 99–105
- Apollinaire, Guillaume 1918 *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War 1913–1916*, Paris: Mercure de France
- Atherton, Cassandra and Paul Hetherington 2023 Ekphrastic spaces: The tug, pull, collision and merging of the in-between, *New Writing* 20.1: 83–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2022.2025850>
- Barry, Peter 2002 Contemporary poetry and ekphrasis, *Cambridge Quarterly* 31: 155–65
- Bell, Julia 2001 Training the eye, in Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (eds.), *The Creative Writing Workbook: Forty-Four Authors Share Advice and Exercises for Fiction and Poetry*, London: Pan Macmillan, pp. 20–23
- Belsey, Catherine 2002 *Critical Practice* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge
- Bullock, Owen 2019 Fresh modes, *Axon* 9.1 (May), <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/9-1/fresh-modes>
- Bullock, O 2018 originary, *Otoliths* 51, <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2018/10/owen-bullock.html>
- Cheeke, Stephen 2008 *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Fanthorpe, UA 1986 *Selected Poems*, London: Penguin
- Firth, Josh A, John Torous & Joseph Firth 2020 Exploring the impact of internet use on memory and attention processes, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249481>
- Francis, James 2009 Metal maidens, Achilles’ shield, and Pandora: The beginnings of ekphrasis, *American Journal of Philology* 130: 1–23
- John Hollander 1995 *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Kennedy, David 2012 *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere*, Farnham: Ashgate

Robson, David 2014 Neuroscience: Why do we see faces in everyday objects *BBC Future* (30 July), <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140730-why-do-we-see-faces-in-objects> (accessed 7 July 2022)

Scobie, Stephen 1997 *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press

Shingler, Katherine 2011 Perceiving text and image in Apollinaire's Calligrammes, *Paragraph* 34.1: 66–85

Webb, Ruth 2009 Ekphrasis ancient and modern: The invention of a genre, *Word & Image* 15: 7–18

Woolf, Virginia 1925 Modern fiction, *The Common Reader*, London: Hogarth Press.

---

### About the author

Oz Hardwick is a poet and academic, whose work has been widely published in international journals and anthologies. His most recent publications are *A Census of Preconceptions* (SurVision Books, 2022) and *My Life as a Time Traveller: A Memoir in 18 Discrete Fragments* (Hedgehog, 2023). With Anne Caldwell, he edited *The Valley Press Anthology of Prose Poetry* (Valley Press, 2019) and *Prose Poetry in Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2022). The anthology *Dancing About Architecture and Other Ekphrastic Maneuvers*, co-edited with Cassandra Atherton, will be published by MadHat Press in 2024. Oz is Professor of Creative Writing at Leeds Trinity University.

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/dwg1njhfmk  
**Keywords:** poetry, collage, collaboration,  
ethnicity, displacement, trauma

# EXTRACTS FROM HEIMLICH UNHEIMLICH

A TEXT-IMAGE COLLABORATION

Hazel Smith (*poet*) and Sieglinde Karl-Spence (*artist*)

## EXTRACTS FROM HEIMLICH UNHEIMLICH: A TEXT-IMAGE COLLABORATION

Hazel Smith and Sieglinde Karl-Spence

### Contextual statement

These texts and images, 'Heimlich Unheimlich', 'From Rubble to Reliving', 'The Vengeful, Directive Angel' and 'Walk to the End of Whistling' are extracts from *Heimlich Unheimlich*, a gallery installation and book created by poet Hazel Smith (Writing and Society Research Centre, Western Sydney University) and artist Sieglinde Karl-Spence.

Heim in German means home, so *Heimlich Unheimlich* can translate loosely as *Homely Unhomely*. However, heimlich more usually means secretive or hidden, while unheimlich means uncanny, so the connotations of the two words can overlap. This relationship between heimlich and unheimlich (discussed in Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The "uncanny"') underlies the piece.

The book employs the contrasting childhoods of Sieglinde Karl-Spence (German-Australian) and Hazel Smith (British-Jewish) as a starting point. It focuses on two characters who have names related to different kinds of cloth. One is Hessian, a German girl born towards the end of the Second World War, whose father fought in the German army. She migrates with her family to Australia when she is still a child and eventually becomes an artist. The other is Muslin, who is born into a Jewish family in England after the war. She is a violinist who subsequently becomes a poet and migrates to Australia as an adult. Her parents live in the shadow of the holocaust and are unforgiving of Nazi Germany. Both Hessian and Muslin are shaped by, but also rebel against, the cultural environments in which they grow up. Their relationship seeds their desire to reconcile their historical cultural differences and to make peace where there has been war.

*Heimlich Unheimlich* suggests strong crossovers between Muslin and Hessian, intertwining and reconciling their different childhoods and their desire to be 'at home' within their own families and the countries where they live. Through the enigma of family photographs, drawn from the family photo albums of Hazel Smith and Sieglinde Karl-Spence, *Heimlich Unheimlich* explores the intergenerational impact of the post-war period (what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory'). This concerns the effects of conflict or oppression on the next generation, the way they continue to carry the burden of the traumatic events experienced by their parents. As Hirsch says:

In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection ... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (Hirsch 1997: 22)

The piece also demonstrates the blending of personal and historical trauma, the bonds of ethnicity, belonging, displacement and migration.

In *Heimlich Unheimlich* there is a reciprocal relationship between text and image. The text (which exploits different fonts and spacings) takes on some visual qualities while the visual images influence the way we read the text. Semiotic analysis has theorised the overlapping

of the different art forms through the concept of the mixed signs (iconic and symbolic) that different media share though in different proportions (Mitchell 1986; Steiner 1982). The balance between iconic signs (signs that resemble their referents) and symbolic signs (signs that have no necessary relationships to their referent) is flexible within the particular medium or within individual art works. So there is the possibility of semiotic exchange between the two systems, of the balance of different signs changing between them, causing one to take on more overtly the characteristics of the other (Smith & Dean 1997: 175). The juxtapositions of text and image in *Heimlich Unheimlich* create tensions between representation and abstraction, continuity and discontinuity. These synergies reinforce the separate but blended identities of the protagonists and the broader social contexts from which they emerge.

*Heimlich Unheimlich* is a multi-faceted project which is also a gallery installation. The installation consists of polyester chiffon hangings inscribed with words and images. It also includes handstitched objects made of muslin and hessian resembling body parts: the cloth used for these objects gives the characters in *Heimlich Unheimlich* their names. The installation has been exhibited in the Broadhurst Gallery, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, Gympie, Sydney (2020), the Edith Cowan University Gallery, Perth (2021) and The John Mullins Memorial Gallery, Dogwood Crossing, Miles, Queensland (2023). The gallery exhibition also includes an art video created by Sieglinde Karl-Spence, Hazel Smith, Roger Dean and the sound and intermedia group australYSIS. The video was selected for the Electronic Literature's Virtual Gallery Exhibition in 2020. In 2024 *Heimlich Unheimlich* will be published as a book by Apothecary Archive, Sydney.

NB: THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE DELIBERATELY HORIZONTAL. THEY ARE BEST VIEWED IN FULL-SCREEN MODE.

# Heimlich Unheimlich

heimlich unheimlich  
heimlich unheimlich  
heim lich unheimlich un

bold illusionists words breed odd memes  
misfits, activists

words do not fit with  
the husks that house them

heimlich as home  
the warm, the friendly, the intimate

heimlich as obscure  
inaccessible to knowledge

heimlich as the name for everything  
that ought to have remained  
hidden and secret

'we call it unheimlich  
you call it heimlich'

dismembered limbs  
a severed head  
a ripped off hand  
feet that twitch by themselves

sundered thoughts  
a dissected brain  
an excommunicated hand  
dancing without toes

aberrant sites  
impaired possibilities  
sliced off words  
force without gravity



# From Rubble to Reliving

memory is  
bricolage not reproduction  
scraps scribblings  
shreds slivers  
mix reassemble

memory is a collage not a video recorder

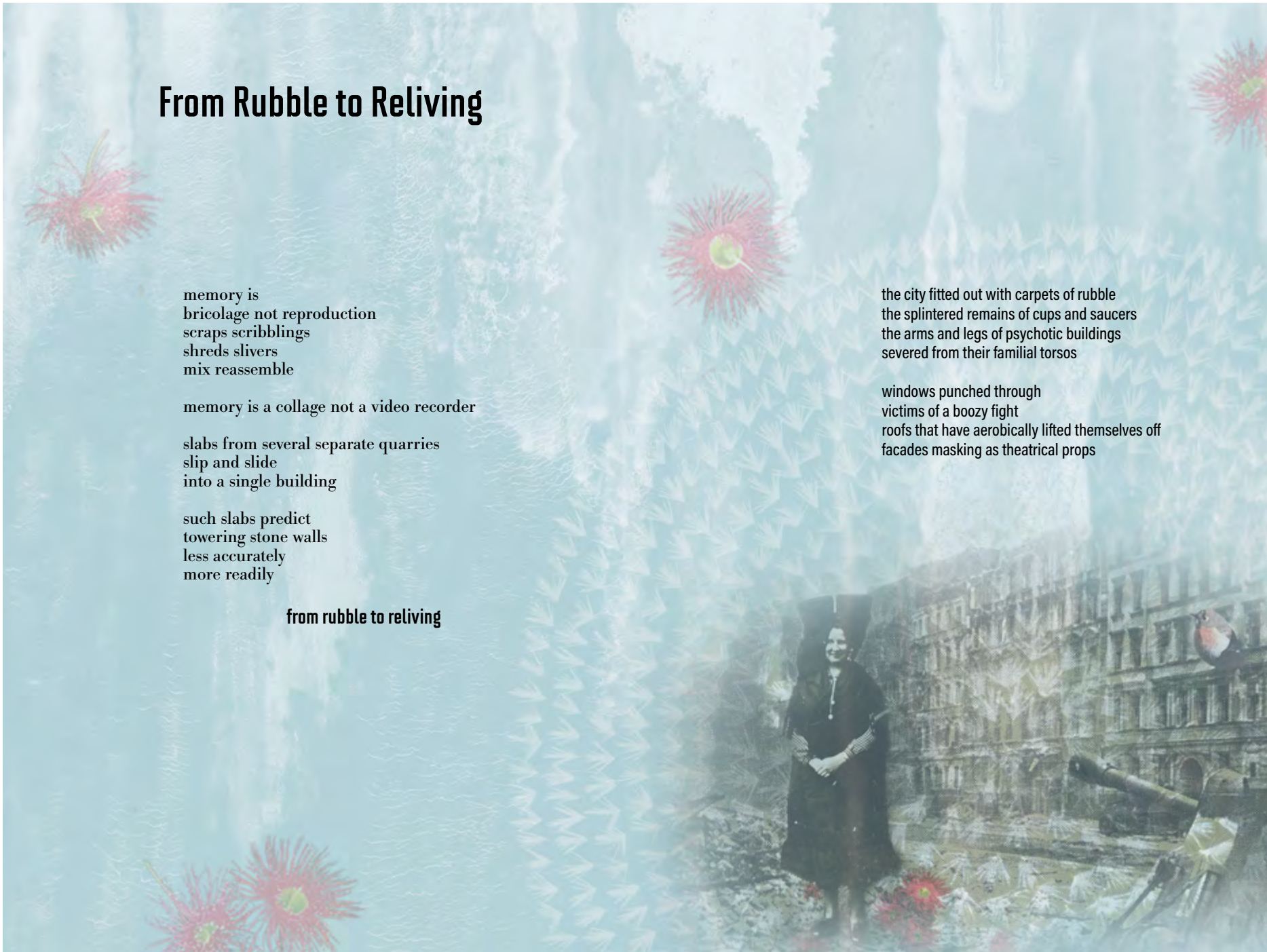
slabs from several separate quarries  
slip and slide  
into a single building

such slabs predict  
towering stone walls  
less accurately  
more readily

**from rubble to reliving**

the city fitted out with carpets of rubble  
the splintered remains of cups and saucers  
the arms and legs of psychotic buildings  
severed from their familial torsos

windows punched through  
victims of a boozy fight  
roofs that have aerobically lifted themselves off  
facades masking as theatrical props





generation after generation  
pounded and pummeled  
the Nazi era  
hoping for a  
knockout blow  
but the past always  
picked itself up

the Baader-Meinhof gang  
children of a nauseous past  
declared war on  
fascist imperialism

they thought fighting it  
would free them  
but history is  
a sly bully  
and seriously  
unforgiving

in 2015 a satirist  
posted quotes  
from Mein Kampf  
and other Nazi literature  
on the UK Daily Mail's website  
substituting the word  
'migrants' for 'Jews'

hundreds of readers  
'liked' the comments





somewhere along the way they lost their histories  
as if they were paper hankies falling  
snowflake-like from their sleeves  
they piece their trajectories together  
from newspaper cuttings, faded photos

the woman walks around a small space  
she feels safe in her tiny territory  
pulls the walls inwards  
hugging them to her  
until they become a silk shawl  
twirled closely round her

another woman is always trying  
to climb out of the space  
that bears down on her  
she clammers again and again  
only to fall back  
but when she escapes  
she runs and runs  
past the borders of countless countries

### 2.3 From Rubble to Reliving



sometimes she scents  
the language of her birth  
the words do not matter  
it is the sound  
the texture  
the hint of home

a home that can never be a home

when she hears German  
strangers melt into intimates

sometimes she believes  
it is her first language  
though that is nonsense

she belongs in Australia  
belongs in Germany  
belongs in England

**belonging has always  
been a faithless bedfellow**

2.4 From Rubble to Reliving



## The Vengeful, Directive Angel

The branches of the family tree kept breeding uncontrollably. Language is permanently foetal; music is a high-wire act. She wanted to write her life truthfully with poetic falsification.

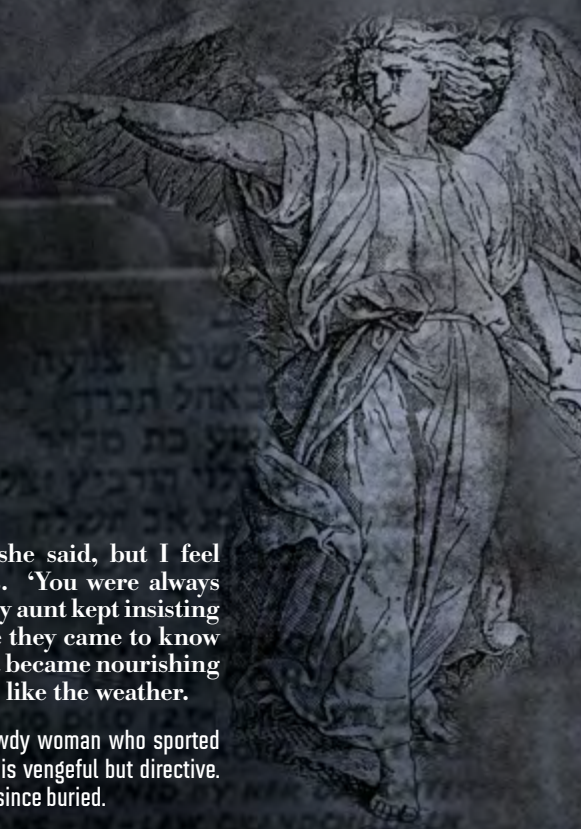
The girl in the dress with the lace collar is learning to play the violin. Smocking filled the mother's days, stretching nerves, cotton, tradition. Muslin was bored visiting elderly relatives, never thinking she'd be old one day. Ritual divorced from its sources divulged very little.

I grew up in Britain, she said, but I feel more at home overseas. 'You were always something of a rebel'. My aunt kept insisting she was well but in time they came to know that she was dying. Guilt became nourishing like food, all-embracing like the weather.

Her father's cousin was a dowdy woman who sported a dark moustache. The angel is vengeful but directive. Bombs, billets: everyone long since buried.

Performance fuels pure trauma. No sunshine for the dead. The Germans and the Israelis sucked different lessons from the holocaust. The violin distorts every muscle in your body, assails every sinew of the mind.

She was equivocal about her ethnicity, ambivalent about saluting the past. She loved the matzos and lemon curd she ate for Passover as a sweet-toothed child. The sugar-coated lady hid a Nazi past: she was deported once she was found out. 'Do I really have to leave forever', she said, 'or can I come back on a visit?'





# Walk to the End of Whistling

last night I walked to the end of whistling  
fields menaced me on all sides  
planted with severed thumbs

silence bent over into yoga positions  
flashing its painted nails  
steading the wayward  
winds of thought

on the horizon a homeless man  
was collecting fingers  
so that he could sew them into gestures  
signalling rags of hope

time has never had much patience with me  
everything was slo-mo or racing  
I wondered if this was the gestation  
of an idea or a rehearsal for  
the end of the world

in the distance I saw a head  
hoisted on a staff  
swaying in the careless distance

sometimes it looked like yours  
sometimes it mimicked mine

if your limbs could be pulled apart  
from each other you said  
they could be laid out  
in tandem with my own

that's what it means to collaborate

a soldier ripped apart in an unnamed war  
begged me to carry his  
body parts home

*last night I walked to the end of whistling  
felder hobn mir fun ale zaytn gestraset  
mit abgetrennten daumen bepflanzt*

*silence bent over into yoga positions  
blitzlendik mit di oysgefarbte negl  
steading the wayward  
winde des denkens*

*on the horizon a homeless man  
hot tsunoyfgezamlt finger  
damit er sie in gesten nähen konnte  
signalling rags of hope*

*time has never had much patience with me  
alles war zeitlupe oder rasen  
I wondered if this was the gestation  
of an idea or a rehearsal for  
dem sof fun der velt*

*in the distance I saw a head  
hoisted on a staff  
swaying in the careless distance*

*manchmal sah er aus wie deiner  
teylmol hot es nokhgemakht mayns*

*if your limbs could be pulled apart  
from each other you said  
me ken zey tselaygn  
im tandem mit meinen eigenen*

*ot dos iz der batayt fun mittsuarbetn*

*a soldier ripped apart in an unnamed war  
begged me to carry his  
body parts home*



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> **Heimlich Unheimlich** Includes photographic material from the family album of Sieglinde Karl-Spence. This collage, like several of the other collages in *Heimlich Unheimlich*, includes a mandala constructed by Sieglinde Karl-Spence from natural materials. The handwriting is a page from Hazel Smith's *Tapa Notebook* in the Special Collections, New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre records, University of Auckland, 2014. The poem alludes to Freud's essay 'The "uncanny"', which explores the relationship between the terms heimlich and unheimlich. It also quotes from the essay: 'we call it unheimlich, you call it heimlich' and 'the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret' (1919: 3).

<sup>2</sup> **From Rubble to Reliving** The collage, which evokes post-war Germany, includes photographic material mainly from the family album of Sieglinde Karl-Spence but also from that of Hazel Smith. It contains a handwritten page from Hazel Smith's *Tapa Notebook* in the Special Collections, New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre records, University of Auckland, 2014. Like several of the other collages in *Heimlich Unheimlich*, this one includes photography of constructed body parts created by Sieglinde Karl-Spence. Some of these body parts, made from hessian and muslin, were originally created for the *Heimlich Unheimlich* exhibition. In the collage (2.2) on the left-hand side, the inscription is taken from a German children's book published in 1925. Sieglinde translates 'Kindheit' as 'Childhood' and 'Des Kindes Kleine und grosse Welt – seine Luft und sein Leid' as 'The child's small and large world – its air and its burden'. The text uses information from the article by Max Chalmers, 'What Happens when you leave Nazi Quotes on Tabloid News Stories? The Readers Love it', *new.matilda.com*, 12 August 2015.

<sup>3</sup> **The Vengeful, Directive Angel** Includes photographic material from the family album of Hazel Smith. This photograph was part of the 2nd edition of Eta Cohen's *The First-Year Violin Method* published by W Paxton and Co. in London in the 1950s (the 1st edition was published in 1941). Eta Cohen (1916-2012) was Hazel Smith's mother. The poem uses information from an article by Richard A Serrano, "'Sweet Lady" Hid Nazi Past', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 September 2006, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-sep-20-me-nazi20-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> **Walk to the End of Whistling** Includes photographic material from the family albums of Sieglinde Karl-Spence and Hazel Smith. In the right-hand column, the poem in English in the lefthand column is rendered in a mixture of English, German and Yiddish. We are grateful to Myra Woolfson for her assistance with the translation from English into Yiddish, and Inge Stocker for her assistance with the translation from English into German.

## Acknowledgement

We are migrant settlers who acknowledge First Nations people as the original inhabitants of Australia. We live and work on unceded Dharawal land and pay our respects to elders past and present.

### Works cited

- Freud, Sigmund 1919 The 'uncanny', <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>
- Hirsch, Marianne 1997 *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press
- Mitchell, WJT 1986 *Iconology: Image, Text and Ideology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Smith, Hazel & Roger T Dean 1997 *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945*, London & New York: Routledge
- Steiner, Wendy 1982 *The Colours of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relations between Modern Literature and Painting*, Chicago: Chicago University Press

---

### About the authors

**Hazel Smith** is a poet, performer, new media artist and academic. She is an Emeritus Professor in the Writing and Society Research Centre, Western Sydney University. She has authored and co-authored several academic books, including *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship* (Routledge, 2016). Hazel has published five volumes of poetry including *Word Migrants* (Giramondo, 2016), and *Ecliptical* (ES-Press, Spineless Wonders, 2022). She has published numerous performance and multimedia works. In 2018, with Will Luers and Roger Dean, she was awarded first place in the Electronic Literature Organisation's Robert Coover prize. In 2023 her collaboration with Luers and Dean, *Dolphins in the Reservoir*, was shortlisted for the UK New Media Writing award. Her website is at [www.australysis.com](http://www.australysis.com)

**Sieglinde Karl-Spence** was born in Germany before emigrating to Australia with her family in 1953. Sieglinde trained as a jeweller but since the late 1980s her practice has focused on installation and performance, including works of a site-specific, transitory nature. Sieglinde's work is represented in most of the major galleries in Australia including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, NT; Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania and Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Sydney, NSW. Her website is at <http://sieglindekarl-spence.com.au/>

---

# PARALLEL POSTS, TUMBLR, AND THE NECESSITY OF POETRY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

‘You are starved for it and you don’t even realise you’re hungry’

Axel-Nathaniel Rose

*University of NSW*, ORCID: 0000-0003-0231-3601

## **Abstract**

This article explores the emergent format of ‘parallel posts’ or ‘web weaving’, a practice of literary collage on blogging website Tumblr, and argues that they represent a new wave of poetry reception, unbound to formal literary education or to conventional spheres of cultural capital. Following Audre Lorde’s ‘Poetry is not a luxury’, I discuss parallel posts as a vital component of the broader digital literary sphere, a counterpoint to Instapoetry, and as a resurgence of commonplace book-keeping. I analyse the prevalence of users positioning poetry on Tumblr as akin to or superior to school-bound English education, and parallel posts as a humanist practice. I conclude by arguing that parallel posts represent a reclamation of poetry as a common resource and an ideology.

## PARALLEL POSTS, TUMBLR, AND THE NECESSITY OF POETRY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: 'YOU ARE STARVED FOR IT AND YOU DON'T EVEN REALISE YOU'RE HUNGRY'

*Axel-Nathaniel Rose*

### Introduction

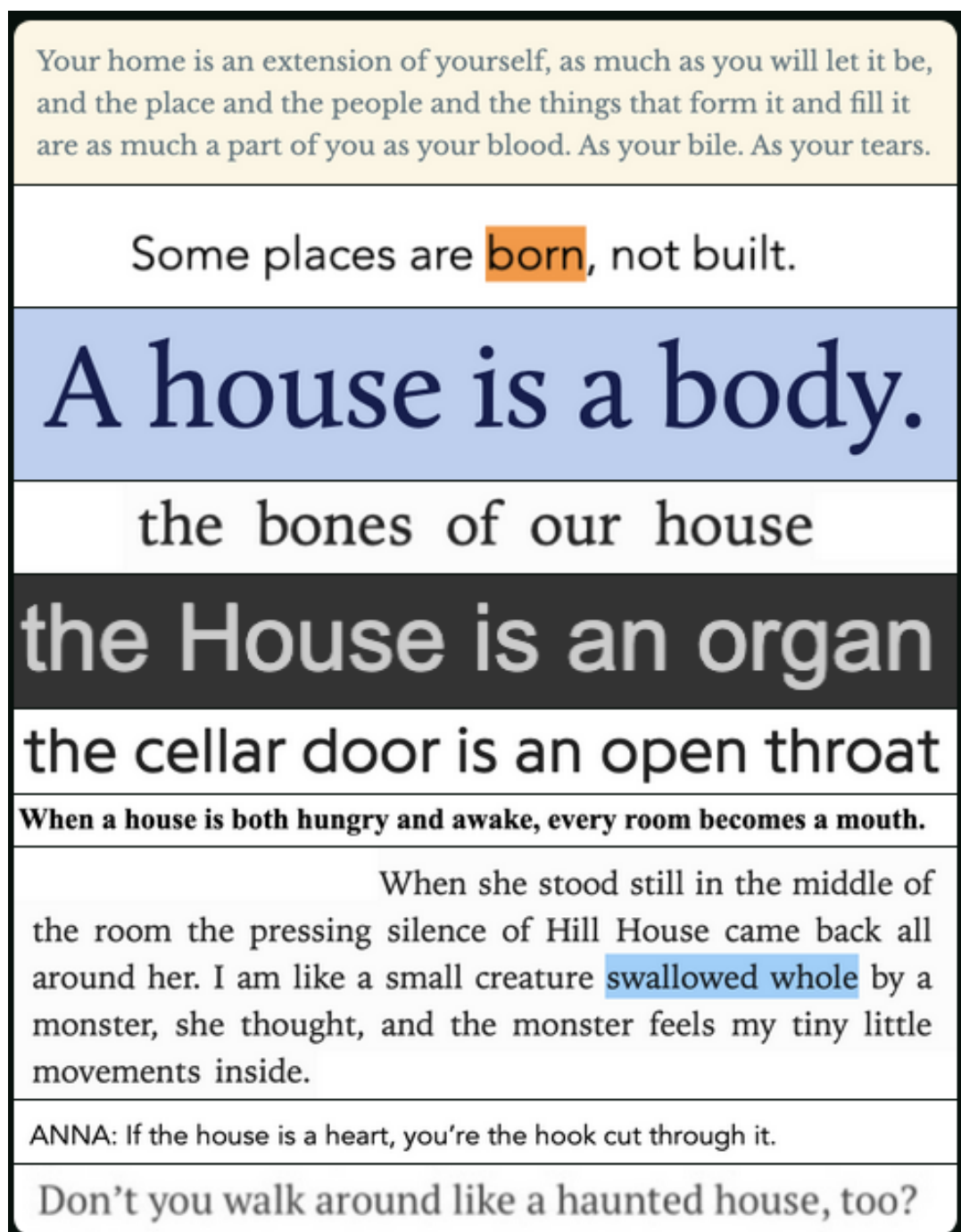
Despite growing scholarly attention to digital 'bookishness', or the performance of self as affiliated with and devoted to books and reading,<sup>1</sup> little scholarship has discussed the role of poetry in digital bookish spaces. While 'Instapoetry' has been perhaps the most influential form of digital poetry in the 21st century thus far, many subtler but equally significant practices have gone without note. In this article, I discuss one of them: the emergent phenomenon of 'parallel posts' or 'web weaving' – collages of brief, decontextualised quotes responding to the same theme, often taken from diverse sources – on blogging website Tumblr. I posit that parallel posts are a response to an age in which poetry has been disconnected from daily life and represent a reclamation of poetry in the digital age.

While Birke and Fehrle (2018) argue that dissatisfaction with English high school education has been a key component of the rise of bookishness (see also Adriaansen 2022; Freider 2022; Murray 2023), most accounts of digital bookishness do not discuss poetry at all, despite its centrality in English education and its prevalence on social media. This leads us to one of parallel posts' most fascinating features: how so many users reflect on the genre as a counterpoint to formal literary education. In parallel posts, we find not a remediation of high school English education, or the 'literary canon' taken broadly, but a counter-canon of texts that speak to Tumblr users, a demographic that is disproportionately young, queer, of colour, and female (McCracken et al. 2020). Parallel posts are a method of grasping for poetic expression, regardless of the origins of a text quoted: whether poetry by label, or poetry found elsewhere – from song lyrics to television programmes to graffiti. In this, poetry is framed as a 'necessity', as Audre Lorde (2018) argues in 'Poetry is not a luxury'. Lorde argues that poetry is 'the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean' (2018: 2; emphasis in original) – to Lorde, poetry is a perspective and mode of shining light, one which, I argue, Tumblr users now cast on every text they encounter: they search for poetry, and if it is not given, they will claim it.

Parallel posts emerged from the intersection of bookish and fandom communities on Tumblr, specifically in the subculture and aesthetic 'Dark Academia'. First made in approximately 2018,<sup>2</sup> parallel posts have gone from a niche trend to one of the most popular meme formats on Tumblr.<sup>3</sup> They were originally an Anglophone trend, and have remained almost entirely Anglophone, with French, Latin, or Ancient Greek occasionally interspersed with otherwise English quotes; I have yet to find a phenomenon like parallel posts in another language. There are two primary forms of parallel posts: collages in sequential order, and 'when/and' posts, in which a sentence begins 'When [author] said [quote]', and further quotes are linked with 'and when [author] said' (1, 2). Users play within these boundaries, and many posts merge styles, for example integrating quotes with original critical writing. Most parallel posts are initially curated by individual users and posted to their own blogs, but many parallel posts become dialogic, with users adding relevant quotes to others' posts by 'reblogging' (similar to 'sharing'

on Facebook or ‘retweeting’ on Twitter/X) the original post; some users who make parallel posts take requests for subject matter, thus developing posts collaboratively.

Parallel posts are diverse in topic, but central recurrent themes are everyday beauty, monstrosity, romantic love, melancholy, and gendered and queer identity. Parallel posts are connected not just by generic tropes but the use of hashtags – most prominently, #parallels, #web weaving, and #poetry. Through hashtags, curators of parallel posts claim myriad sources as poetry by bringing quotes from different sources into conversation, in snippets of acute resonance.



1 A collage-style parallel post on the house as body.



when lizzo said "self love is survival" and when hannah gadsby said "do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? it's not humility. it's humiliation" and when mitski said "i used to rebel by destroying myself, but realized that's awfully convenient to the world. for some of us our best revolt is self preservation"

2 A 'when/and'-style parallel post on self-love and -respect amongst those 'who already exist in the margins'.

Parallel posts began as purely lexical, but users quickly began to incorporate images, stills from television and films, and GIFs. While any text can theoretically be drawn into a parallel post, there are authors and texts drawn on most commonly: the dominant poetic voices are those of Anne Carson, Richard Siken, Louise Glück, Ocean Vuong, and Mary Oliver; they are joined by campus novels *The Secret History* (Donna Tartt, 1992) and *If We Were Villains* (ML Rio, 2017); the prose of Oscar Wilde, Sylvia Plath, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf; the lyrics of alternative pop singers Hozier, Mitski, and Florence Welch; television programs *Hannibal* and *Supernatural*; and films *Dead Poets Society* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Some links can be found in this diverse collection – intense emotion; lyrical acuity; classical reception; invocation and subversion of Catholicism; body horror; the idea of love as a religion; homoeroticism or explicit queer text; expressions of monstrosity; and reflections on gender and embodiment – all of which are now memetic through the medium of parallel posts.

The post which titles this article, 'you are starved for it and you don't even realise you're hungry', was made in April 2023 and currently holds almost 60,000 'notes' (combined likes, reblogs, and replies). It is a neat articulation of a moment of time in which young people's engagement with poetry, and literature more broadly, is in a conflicted state between criticism, detachment, sincerity, and desperation.

people on here are always saying "we NEED a story where the art of storytelling is abandoned" like ugh literary devices are soo annoying like that wouldn't happen in real life that only happened to further the story (why is there story in my story) [...] why are [narratives] so earnest why pour your heart and soul into anything why bother why cant all art be quippy logical monotony [...] there's a void in my heart bc i refused to fill it and the curtains were blue

"i hate poetry its so pretentious" but then you reblog a quote or a throwaway line and say "why does this go so hard" you are desperate for poetry you are starved for it and u dont even realise you're hungry

Parallel posts are an outpouring of desire for acute sincerity, beautiful language, and poetry. While fragmented quotes and snippets of poetry have been a constant of online culture, parallel posts are unique in their *collation* of many quotes; they linger; they connect; they continuously expand. They always gesture outwards, to *more poetry*, and in their extreme self-containment and specificity of subject matter, they obfuscate detachment or irony.

Mike Chasar argues in *Poetry Unbound* that ‘poetry travels more easily than any other art’ and has been embedded in the history of media change (2020: 11); he suggests that to track the spread and sharing of poetry is to track the history of media change. It is from this premise that I study parallel posts, not just as artefacts in themselves, but representations of how personal expression and artistic communication live on social media. While prognostications and elegies on poetry’s life, death, and afterlife carry on, Chasar argues that to understand ‘poetry’s capacities in an age of nonprint media, we need to do so by looking [to] where poetry flourishes in the wilds of mass and popular culture’ (2020: 9). I further this claim and argue that we need to look to the name itself – what is being *called* poetry? As parallel posts spread and evolve, they have remained grounded in poetry: poetry is the throughline and frame of content in parallel posts. Users claim infinitely diverse sources as poetry and, in so doing, create a community and ideology of poetry; they represent a turn in how poetry is defined, shared, and transformed online. In an era of complex relations of class and capital, neoliberalism and education, and in a state of near-absolute digital hyperconnectivity (see Brubaker 2020; Adriaansen 2022; Murray 2023), we have reached a tipping point in which young people are claiming – or reclaiming – poetry as wholly their own.

As another user says,

Genuinely the posts where people collate and juxtapose a bunch of different media texts to convey an idea with all the citations at the bottom are the best thing to have come out of this site [...] Intertextuality is genuinely one of the things that I go feral for<sup>4</sup> without hesitation and I adore it it’s such a good use of the medium I hope it never stops

This post, made in mid-2021 and carrying over fifty thousand notes, is a wonderful point of insight into how Tumblr users themselves view parallel posts. I have grouped the hundreds of replies to this post into five categories, which I will use to structure this article: first, that parallel posts are unique to or a highlight of Tumblr culture, and that they are akin to historical commonplace books. I will then discuss users’ framing of parallel posts as both similar and superior to studying English, and the potential reasons behind this claim – centrally, the capacity for the young women who dominate parallel posts to create their own ethical and stylistic literary canon, and defiance of categories of cultural capital. Parallel posts being taken as simultaneously an intimate technology of the self and a form of reflection on the collective nature of humanity will close my discussion. The conclusion argues that parallel posts take ‘poetry’ not as a form but a worldview.

All figures and works quoted have been taken from the public #web weaving or #parallels hashtag threads on Tumblr, and all have been reblogged/shared by hundreds or thousands of other users, and thus live across many blogs. As parallel posts are made and discussed almost exclusively by private individuals and not public figures, all cited content has been anonymised. While this unfortunately strips credit from users’ creations, this is preferable to infringing on their privacy. This study was carried out in accordance with ethics clearance from the UNSW Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel (project HC211019).

#### **#i love this about tumblr!**

#the exact reasons i stick around this hellsite #the entanglement of everything

#i love this about tumblr! #at its best this site is like a hive mind

#TikTok's jumped on it but it's always regurgitated directly from here #tumblr creates the internet and everyone ignores her

Tumblr was founded in 2007, oriented towards artists sharing their portfolios. It featured overlapping affordances of blogs and social media – centrally, customisability, anonymity, relative privacy, and versatility in terms of post length and multimedia format (Tiidenberg, Hendry & Abidin 2021; McCracken et al. 2020). It gained traction as an artists' and writers' space, but also as a space of media fandom, left-wing activism, and queer, feminist, and broadly counterpublic gathering. It hosts a strong sense of 'imagined intimacy' among users, fostered by strong 'polyvocal and intertextual expressions of humor and relatability' (Tiidenberg et al. 2021: 43). McCracken et al. present Tumblr as 'a more egalitarian, nonhierarchical, uncensored media environment' than other platforms, less prone to reverse identification or surveillance (2021: 5), and Tumblr users themselves discuss Tumblr as a safe or unique space in contrast to other platforms, which become 'a tiring, noisy, manipulative space' in Tumblr's 'collective imaginary' (2021: 60). Tiidenberg et al. posit that this sense of separateness from other platforms 'lead[s] to more radical political [...] and more vulnerable personal [...] self-expression' (2020: 51); Tumblr thus epitomises the statement of the personal as political, and the two intertwined.

Hypertextuality and intertextuality are embedded in Tumblr's function; 'reblogging' or sharing other people's posts is the most common form of content-sharing on Tumblr; Tiidenberg, Hendry and Abidin estimate as little as 10% of content on Tumblr is 'original' (2021: 24). The reblog function has been discussed and theorised at length, with McCracken et al. calling it Tumblr's 'most influential design innovation' (2021: 4), and the feature which defines Tumblr as 'a digital public scrapbook that users collectively create and curate' (2021: 5). Tiidenberg et al. argue that Tumblr's temporality is highly nonlinear, largely because of the reblog feature – posts can be continuously circulated for years, 'die' unobserved immediately, or be reborn; this facilitates a pervasive sense of ephemerality and timelessness (2021: 45). Similarly, Cho theorises Tumblr as a temporal and affective space of 'queer reverb', or 'refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo' (2015: 53). Cho takes affect 'as a force or intensity that exists somewhere in between an embodied, sensorial experience and the naming of an emotion [...] and] an attunement between entities' (2015: 44). Through reblogs and repetition, Tumblr hosts a constant multimodal chorus of voices echoing and overlapping. Beyond its affordances, much of Tumblr's culture has emerged from media fandom, which Stein argues is grounded in modes of textual engagement defined by 'return, recirculation, and transformative reworking' (2017: 87) and 'duplication / replication / reiteration' (2017: 90). In fandom, meaning is created 'out of combination, juxtaposition, and collision' of different texts (2017: 94). It is this cultural norm that sets the stage for parallel posts' success.

Poetry is used across millions of Tumblr blogs, some of which centre poetry or literature, and some of which use poetry as one resource among many. The spread of poetry through non-literary blogs is just as significant to a poem's life as any other; to read one line in isolation, mediated through hashtags and each blogger's unique context, is a distinct mode of engaging with poetry compared with reading a collection in full, but it is just as significant in terms of a poem's circulation, its ongoing relevance, and its author's prevalence. The internet has always granted autonomy to those who wish to engage with literature in a space where poetic tastes arise governed more by community than by institutional authority; as Gopalakrishnan argues, 'the Web extends and rejuvenates literary culture and flattens hierarchies though previously unthinkable possibilities for collectivity and participation' (2006: 6), 'more humane

and democratic than the everyday world' (2006: 7). Literary community online has grown into the phenomenon of digital bookishness, which Birke and Fehrle argue is in large part a reclamation of the 'central role of reading for self-cultivation' (Birke & 2018 Fehrle: 76–77) outside of the school system. Online, literature is personal and self-controlled, and affective engagement takes precedence over formal features or critical analysis (see also Gopalakrishnan 2006). There are myriad manifestations of bookishness online, but it is growing exponentially in such trends as 'Bookstagram', 'BookTok', and 'Dark Academia'. Dark Academia is a sub-culture, internet aesthetic, and now published subgenre of campus novel that arose from queer fandom on Tumblr in the mid-2010s. It is a specific aestheticisation of bookishness, centring education, literature, and poetry taken broadly in a visual frame of 19th- and 20th-century sandstone universities. Simone Murray argues Dark Academia is a harbinger of digital literary futures and a key source of insight into 'how conceptions of the literary world and book culture more generally are mass-cultivated and publicly circulate in a digitally-saturated age' (2023: 362). Parallel posts rose to prominence alongside Dark Academia, and their themes and most regular authors are reflective of Dark Academia's self-made 'literary canon'. While much fine attention is now given to bookishness online and Dark Academia, little of it even glances towards poetry; while Dark Academia is now associated almost exclusively with novels on Instagram and TikTok, Dark Academia's growth on Tumblr was fuelled by poetry, and an ideology surrounding poetry drove the subculture's rise.

Dark Academia is just one part of a poetic moment on Tumblr; the site as a whole is turning to poetry, in a fashion this user (3) summarises as having created a 'common literary language' of Tumblr poets, primarily driven by a cohort of young girls and women. They call this 'one of the most beautiful things to happen to poetry if not literature in a while', framing it as liberatory, self-expressive, cathartic, and community-building. While framed as something insular to Tumblr, this reflects broader trends of poetry reception; the 2010s hosted a boom in poetry sales globally, with young women and girls as the majority demographic of readers (Ferguson 2019). Ferguson attributes this rise to 'political millennials' searching for 'clarity',

my hot take is that i like all of the "tumblr poets" and i think that the common literary language of what is largely girls in their teens and twenties on this website is one of the most beautiful things to happen to poetry if not literature in a while

i love you richard siken i love you wendy cope i love you mary oliver i love you frank o'hara i love you ada limón i love you danez smith i love you i love you i love you the shared experience of connecting with art and finding the words that speak not just to you but for you

3 A post on Tumblr's poetic culture as a culture of young women and girls.

mirroring many past times of crisis when poetry thrived (2019: n.p.). While Instapoetry, social media's poetic medium *du jour*, has been variously derided as vacuous – or simply not poetry at all – due to its brevity, emphasis on quotability, and repetitive qualities, it remains a key part of contemporary poetry culture and selling, in large part due to this demographic of young women and marginalised people. I suggest that parallel posts are something of a distorted mirror to Instapoetry – like Instapoetry, they are fragmentary, visual as much as lexical, and often hold only one idea, but parallel posts are grounded in the voices of others rather than bound to a single poet's voice or identity. Parallel posts sustain sentiment through multiple parts, constantly gesturing outwards to larger texts rather than standing alone and tightly self-contained as Instapoems do. I posit that parallel posts, similarly to Instapoetry, act as a digitised outpour of a generation of young people, largely women, claiming the necessity of poetry as Lorde conceived it – not a luxury or product of the ivory tower, but a shared resource, light, and liberator. Instapoetry is a phenomenon of new and largely self-contained poems; parallel posts are simultaneously self-contained found poems and a phenomenon of creative and intertextual poetry *reception*. Parallel posts are a performance of 'poeticness' or 'literariness' akin to Dark Academia, bookishness more broadly, or Instapoetry, but as with all these phenomena, they contain the roots of a sincere – and perhaps, educational – engagement with literature. Regardless of the criticisms which surround any bookish trend, there is creative and literary labour in all these performances of bookishness. I am hesitant to suggest there is 'more' labour in a parallel post than any other, but there is, I think, more directly analytical and critical labour; many parallel posts seem like fragmentary essays, intricate found poems, or short stories; all require a close attention to themes, motifs, and style across texts. Parallel posts are performative, laborious expressions of personal connection to media; in this, they continue the legacy of commonplace books.

### **#They're just like early modern commonplace books**

#They're just like early modern commonplace books

#florilegium

As these users point out, parallel posts mirror commonplace books, or their Middle Ages predecessor, the florilegia. These were journals or manuscripts kept to collect quotes, usually under themed headings (Allan 2011). Their intellectual lineage goes back to Plato's theory of the *hupomnemata*, and they have gone through many permutations over centuries. Foucault theorises the *hupomnemata* as a 'technology of the self', or tool of self-transformation and self-definition – he posits that through reflecting on and collecting quotes, the curator takes a text into their 'tissue and blood' (1983: n.p.), simultaneously transforming their own character and creating a new work in the physical form of the *hupomnemata*. While Renaissance-era commonplace books were tools of the male elite advancing their own knowledge, as literacy grew across classes and sexes, commonplace books were used by myriads with myriad goals – for example, storing recipes, devotional study, popular lyric, scrapbooking, and family history (Allan 2011).

Comparisons between digital content curation and commonplace books are indeed commonplace (e.g., Eichhorn 2008; Rettberg 2014; Rowberry 2016), but despite poetry's vital presence in the history of commonplacing, poetry has been starkly absent in discussions of commonplace books' digital remediation. Commonplace books, poetry scrapbooks, and their many kindred forms were a primary playing field of poetry as public resource – as *commons* –



for centuries, and I look to them as historical counterparts to parallel posts. As Chasar (2012) argues, the mid-20th century through to the 21st has been unusual in its *lack* of a common sense of public ownership of poetry. Lynch (2018), Lockridge (2004), and Chasar (2012) argue that commonplace books give unique insight into literary reception, and can give a greater impression of a ‘people’s canon’ of poetry than sales records and post hoc summaries of an author’s significance. They represent ‘everyday’ people’s active, discerning, and creative engagements with poetry, unbound to schools, universities, or the cultural elite. The internet is now allowing for a reclamation of poetry as ‘commons’, and for non-poetic sources to be labelled and treated as poetry. While power hierarchies and elitism remain embedded in bookish online spaces – to say nothing of the literacy needed to access such spaces – they enable a degree of reader engagement otherwise rare offline; the public are free to cut, paste, and grow as they wish.

### **#this is why tumblr is better than english class**

#somewhere between the mindset of making a collage & prepping to write an essay

#like there’s an essay here but you don’t get the essay only the references and you get to form the essay on your brain based on them

#no literally every time i see one i think i gain a brain cell

#we all had those literature assignments like compare themes of x in text a and text b #and we said what if it were a tumblr post

In taking this quote on Tumblr’s primacy over English classes as my title, I indulge melodrama only for a moment; the sentiment is a vital one to explore. As Simone Murray (2023) argues, social media is a key site from which new students and scholars of literature will emerge; understanding phenomena such as Dark Academia is essential to understanding our students’ – and our colleagues’ – engagement with literature. So, *why* is Tumblr better than English class? Why would one even compare them?

Tumblr has been a source of ‘education’ since its inception. Tiidenberg et al. call Tumblr ‘informative, but through education rather than newsy ways’ in contrast with other social media platforms, attributing its success in this regard as being ‘not profile-based or legal name-linked’, and largely disconnected from mainstream flows of commerce (2021: 13). Freider (2022) theorises young (teen through twenties) Tumblr users’ sharing of educational resources as a ‘nomadic pedagogy’, in which users mutually self-educate and remove access barriers to education, most often in the humanities – and I note, especially literature. Most bookish Tumblr users engage with literature in a mode which combines critical and personal attention; this is reflective of how Gopalakrishnan (2006) views early poetry email lists and blogging communities as poetry *fandom*, as per Henry Jenkins’ (a founding parent of fan studies) view of fandom as including both emotional engagement and critical distance. On Tumblr, literary engagement is not just education, but fandom – the personal, the aesthetic, and the communal are as significant as the scholarly, the formal, and the historical. Perhaps this is why ‘Tumblr is better than English class’.

As the above quoted users note, parallel posts are comparable to many tasks in both high school and tertiary English education; each parallel post is a comparative study of themes across texts. Unlike essays, however, they uniquely take out the need for elaboration; curators



allow sentiment and argument to lurk, building associative maps without providing discursive links, as cities without roads. Some users have taken to creating parallel posts that are explicitly cross-generic, intertwining original analysis with quotes, much as quotes might be used in an essay. Users delight in this pseudo-scholarly labour, which many note as distinct from their formal education in that it welcomes the affective, emotive, and idiosyncratic. Each parallel post models a mode of media engagement bound to making links, thematic analysis, and understanding literature as something that connects across time and space.

There is an autotelic analytical value in parallel posts; users have commented on how parallel posts allow for a precision of sentiment otherwise impossible to grasp, one saying that,

theyre soooo good at conveying a specific idea in all its minute detail!!! #like theres always One bit of text that really speaks to the idea #but if you juxtapose it against conflicting/other descriptive pieces of art #then that idea becomes more faceted and you get closer to explaining the TRUE intent of your words

and another saying,

#[Art is] not always brilliant or sensical. It's just the way you feel expressed as best you can #Perhaps a morsel of your sentiments are communicated effectively #And when put together across a wide array of other art trying to express similar ideas #The whole of the sentiment is communicated

These users argue that meaning is clarified by bringing multiple texts together in a fashion that would be impossible with quotes in isolation – whether or not they are ‘brilliant or sensical’. This is an autodidactic, sense-making practice, and it aligns with Lorde’s view of poetry as ‘the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought’ (2018: 2–3); parallel posts posit that this naming of the nameless is found in the space and linkages between texts. A thought or experience becomes whole not through a perfect articulation, but through the meshing of related ideas – which could just as rightly be called affective as semantic, returning to Cho’s (2015) definition of affect as that which overflows – largely incommunicable but deeply felt. This analytical value is self-contained, even without looking to the broader blogging practices of those who make parallel posts – many of whom shared quite traditional textual analysis and scholarly research, often drawing from the same texts they use in parallel posts.

The texts and authors most often drawn on are also a point of contrast with a standard English class. Some authors and texts are over-represented in parallel posts and have become recognisable markers of Tumblr’s bookish community – and specifically Dark Academia. The repetition of quotes creates an affective landscape of echoing voices and repeated themes in any poetry- or literature-related search. As discussed, texts from different mediums overlap through common affiliative terms of poetry and Dark Academia – from the poetry of Anne Carson and Richard Siken through to the novels of Donna Tartt and the horror television program *Hannibal*. This landscape of texts and themes is so well-known that it is joked about and referred to without further elaboration (4), and many users have explicitly reflected on this collection of texts as ‘the Dark Academic literary canon’ or simply ‘Tumblr’s literary canon’. (Humorously, Dark Academia is often referred to as the practice of ‘roleplaying as a literary theorist’.)

Users’ ability to take the texts they are drawn to, regardless of their status in the broader cultural sphere, and treat them as serious texts worthy of intertextual labour, is something

I'm very [the whole truth is, I'm in love with him still] [it is what it is. you, me] [but you know what I am] [every love story is a ghost story] [you burn me] [when you really love something it loves you back in whatever way it has to love] [we have to submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known] [when I watch the world burn all I think about is you] these days

4 A parallel post quoting multiple texts from Tumblr's 'literary canon' without elaborating on the quotes' sources.

vital when thinking about literary education, and something I find more and more important as a method of connecting with students in Creative Writing and Media Studies classrooms. In the context of HSC English, students are permitted to choose 'related texts' to be analysed alongside the prescribed specifically to allow for this bridging of the gap between formal and personal perspectives on a media property's significance – enriched further when students use texts from across mediums (see Murray 2014; Mayes 2010). Mayes discusses using students' choice of texts in a classroom being a way of expanding 'the definition of culture' (2010: 49), not only bringing domains of 'popular' and 'literary' culture together but allowing students to introduce texts from their own cultural backgrounds. Freider posits that Tumblr users, in the absence of classrooms, create 'counterhegemonic' knowledge structures through sharing resources, 'by allowing [their] own young, often female and queer subjectivity to guide what is deemed as relevant and credible' (2022: 35). Sharing the demographic of young womanhood and, often, queer young womanhood, means a user-made syllabus is 'peer-blessed – deemed read-able and worthwhile' (2022: 36) on ethical as well as stylistic grounds, contrary to the common complaints of the literary canon being the domain of old and straight (and, as Lorde would add, white) men. Anything in the literary canon that is irrelevant or antithetical to the demographics' concerns can be omitted. In this fashion, taking as much from academe and 'high' culture as popular culture, Tumblr users create a literary canon of what speaks to them. On Tumblr, Anne Carson is spoken about with the same reverence, and assuming the same level of cultural knowledge, as Shakespeare might be elsewhere; Percy Shelley is a figure of interest more for his link to Mary Shelley – Tumblr's Gothic, feminist, and literary icon – than his poetry.

Many users responding to our initial post on the value of parallel posts pointed out that their favourite, or the most valuable, part of parallel posts is the juxtaposition of vastly different source texts:

#peak tier is like #(academic text) (ancient love poem) (nickleback lyric) (nasa picture) #this is why tumblr is better than english class #oh here it's creative and sexy #but when i make bastille and/or shrek references in lit class it's 'derailing the discussion' and i need to 'stick to the source material'

#i love it!! #especially when it's a mix of 'fine art' and 'basic' pop music etc

While there is a literary canon of parallel posts, it is difficult to find a parallel post that does not draw from a non-literary source. Lines of cultural capital are challenged through the archival

act of compiling quotes; cultural distinctions between high and low art are collapsed in service of the greater story – or greater sentiment, greater affect. All quotes used are reframed as part of a poetic culture through the genre affiliation and interpretive community of parallel posts, in which literary worth is based on specificity of sentiment rather than cultural status.

Jim Collins posits that since the dawn of high pop, or the ‘populari[s]ation of elite tastes for mass audiences’ (2002: n.p.), in the 1960s amid booming neoliberalism, we have been in a ‘taste crisis’ (2002: 7), in which we must assess and cultivate an excess of cultural content theretofore unimaginable – I posit more unimaginable now in 2023 than when Collins wrote in 2002, with public culture ruled by profound digital hyperconnectivity and neoliberal ideologies of self-improvement. Now much cultural content does not need to be bought; it can be curated, copied, pirated, or found opensource – all for free, but all demanding time and attention. However, greater access to ‘culture’ and education on the internet has not soothed anxieties around cultural hierarchies and worth. In many ways, it has exacerbated them, visible in bookishness across many platforms – indeed, Adriaansen (2022) takes Dark Academia as an aestheticised manifestation of concerns around culture and education. Blurred lines of cultural capital are embedded in Tumblr’s literary canon; Murray notes that many of Dark Academia’s preferred texts ‘noticeably straddle literary/popular fiction publishing categories’ (2023: 352); nonetheless, they are cherished and considered part of an intellectual, readerly identity. The inclusion of diverse texts in Dark Academia and parallel posts seems to represent a firm, if nervous, statement of texts’ equivalent worth, equivalent capacity to affect readers, and equivalent scope for analysis, with each text granting new points of insight into a theme. Tumblr users often tag their parallel posts with ‘poetry’, ‘quotes’, ‘words’, and ‘books’, regardless of content. This implies that users view parallel posts as inherently linked to bookishness; according to users, parallel posts are a reflection on reading and reading culture. The constancy of aligning parallel posts with poetry not only seems to say, ‘do not fear; poetry lives on’, but as texts entwine, that the tension between high and low culture is false. Parallel posts claim literacy and literature both, taking literacy as a skill set of making connections, and literature as a category of that which enriches mind and spirit.

The post that names this article states ‘there’s a void in my heart bc i refused to fill it and the curtains were blue’; ‘the curtains were blue’ refers to a meme-like complaint among Tumblr users about the teaching of English, in which a teacher instructs students to link imagery with characters’ emotional states, which many users find vapid. This post implies that students have dismissed literary analysis to an extreme of alienation from poetry; they are a generation left unable to identify with poetry. So, while there is certainly some hyperbole in the statement of Tumblr being ‘better than English class’, the value of shared demographics, ideology, and fannish interest that have facilitated the popularity of parallel posts cannot be overstated.

**#sometimes it’s intimate and sometimes it’s sweeping humanity #and sometimes it’s memes**

#literally I love it so much like YES draw parallels across medium and genre and time!!!! the world is actually quite small #and we all can understand each other better than we think we can!!!

#something something universal human experiences

#the best way i can describe it is that it feels human

#we are all building on each other #sometimes it's intimate and sometimes it's sweeping humanity #and sometimes it's memes #and i love all of it

Users' reflections on the philosophical implications of the form itself are as rich a theme as many posts' contents. As some users discuss intertextuality as something which allows for greater clarity of sentiment, others have highlighted that intertextuality demonstrates the proximity of human communication and sentiment 'across medium and genre and time'. Parallel posts foreground the inherent relationality of texts and similarity in human experiences; the form reflects that few thoughts, feelings, or experiences are unique. As Lorde argues, 'there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt – of examining what those ideas feel like being lived' across different circumstances (2018: 5); she says, 'there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us [...] There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves' (2018: 4). This seems like a description of parallel posts' very function. Every parallel post reaches outwards – backwards, forwards – to connect with others. As users claim parallel posts as a part of poetic culture, the name 'poetry' comes to represent often unspoken but nonetheless pervasive values of interconnection and of literacy.

Parallel posts gesture outwards to shared human experience, and they are simultaneously personal archives of their curators' media consumption. As with commonplace books, and their many sibling practices, parallel posts are technologies of the self – the Foucauldian concept of those actions performed on the self to transform 'bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way[s] of being' (Foucault 1983: n.p.). Foucault argues that the *hupomnemata* consisted of two processes of writing – one, reflection on self in writing to others, and two, in compilation of quotes. For purposes of self-cultivation of knowledge, the broader context of a quote did not matter; it was insignificant if a curator understood a whole text, because it was their reflection and synthesis of material that self-created. Parallel posts fulfil both of Foucault's theories of written *hupomnemata*: the self is written to others, as posts are shared via the public format of blogging, and quotes are organised in a personal structure. In the *hupomnemata*, commonplace books, and parallel posts alike, the curator withholds their own voice, but simultaneously discloses the texts and themes which impact them. As Foucault conceived of the *hupomnemata* as a practice of a curator mingling text, quotes, and history with their own 'tissue and blood', in parallel posts, the act of fragmentation becomes one of memorialisation, the curator absorbing the text into themselves. Each parallel post plays the dual role of being highly individual and highly collective. They carry on the commonplace book's role as an intimate *and* networked quotational practice.

Freider argues that parallel posts' use of collage draws into question 'the values of singular authorship, originality, and independence that we hold highest under capitalist modes of content production' (2022: 40), and in this, they carry an anticapitalist ethos in their very form. Freider posits that curators envision 'alternative textualities where information is recognized as a fluid tool for subjectivities' (2022: 40). I suggest that they are in their very form a surrender to the impossibility of a wholly individual 'voice' or absolute authenticity; parallel posts demonstrate the bricolaged nature of human sentiment. Lynch (2018) argues that the commonplace book is a text which respects fragility, fragmentation, and incompleteness, and parallel posts follow this tradition, fragmented, interpersonal intertextuality variegated throughout. One of Richard Siken's most-quoted lines reads, 'I surrender my desire for a logical culmination. I surrender my desire to be healed'; this line is thread through parallel posts in the topic of surrender



– surrendering redemption, closure, or wholeness. Ocean Vuong, fellow ‘canonical’ Tumblr author, said his 2019 novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* emerged as a text ‘so fractured – so in pieces’, out of his decision to ‘refuse to create a whole finished product, but [make] the phantom of a product’ (Vuong & Spiegel 2017: n.p.). This refusal is the same in parallel posts; each is a ‘phantom’ of sentiment, a ghost of a story, a spectre of a curator’s experience of the media around them.

### **Conclusion: #it’s like a magical art diary collage poem**

#I was thinking about this the other day #this type of intertextual poetry we have built here

#poetry is showing all the way around a thought that’s hard to summarize on its own [...] #in other words my thesis is these are high level poetry and also great!

#it’s like a magical art diary collage poem #transcends everything mwah i love it

According to these users, parallel posts are intertextual poetry, hybrid ‘magical art diary collage poems’, and ‘high level poetry’. They are ‘high level poetry’ due to their acuity in portraying that which is ‘hard to summarize on its own’, in much the same way as Audre Lorde considered poetry the process through which ‘we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless’ or ‘distillation of experience’ (2018: 1). While Lorde attributed this task to individual poems, users discuss parallel posts as achieving a clarity or precision unseen in lone works. Whether parallel posts are poetry in themselves or are better called poetic fandom or creative poetry reception, they are a source of engagement with poetry that permeates the lives of their creators and readers; they are an extension of poetry’s life online. Gopalakrishnan argues that the internet allowed people outside of academia and the literati to develop a view of poetry as ‘an everyday medium that speaks of ordinary lives and moments in an extraordinary way, one that simply draws attention to the world by drawing attention to language’ (2006: 6). For the poetry blogs Gopalakrishnan studied as much as for curators of parallel posts, poetry is not a form, but a worldview: Gopalakrishnan argues, ‘poetry is what is produced when one learns to look with poetry-seeing eyes’; it is in ‘acts of recognition’ that poetry is made (2006: 36). This too is Lorde’s view – poetry as illumination, ‘the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives’ (2018: 1), and in so doing, transform them; poetry is not a luxury but an ideology. Texts are shared as poetry, and thus become it. Viewing parallel posts alongside each other, this is a prevailing ideology of connection, binding the individual (who curates) and the collective (who voice, who have shared, who *are* shared).

To return to the post which titled this article on a starvation of poetry: I posit that many users have transitioned from sharing single quotes or throwaway lines asking ‘why does this go so hard’ to collating and collaging them as a form of reclamation of the idea of poetry itself. Parallel posts are a type of confession – desperate for poetry, starved for it, and devouring it as it stands.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Murray 2023; Birke 2021; Birke & Fehrle 2018; Pressman 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Due to Tumblr's dispersed archival features and the lack of a centralised body making parallel posts, I have been unable to find an exact date.

<sup>3</sup> As of late 2022, parallel posts have been shared to the video site TikTok under the name 'web weaving', with quotes shown one after the other rather than as a sequential collage.

<sup>4</sup> To 'go feral for' indicates feeling something intensely – and in the extreme, to a state of agitated excitement and enjoyment.

## Acknowledgements

I thank the Australian Government RTP program and the UNSW ADA EDI department for funding this research, and the UNSW GRS for funding my attendance at *Out of the Ordinary 2022*. Thank you to my supervisors and research review team: Paul Dawson, Craig Billingham, Stephanie Bishop, Sean Pryor, and Michael Richardson. And finally, thanks to the whole *Out of the Ordinary* company, especially Amelia Walker, Vahri McKenzie, Oz Hardwick, Paul Magee, Paul Collis, and SJ Parker.

## Works cited

- Adriaansen, R 2022 Dark Academia: Curating affective history in a COVID-era internet aesthetic, *International Public History AOP*: 1–10
- Allan, D 2011 *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Birke, D 2021 Social reading? On the rise of a 'bookish' reading culture online, *Poetics Today* 42.2: 149–72
- Birke, D and J Fehrle 2018 #booklove: How reading culture is adapted on the internet, *Komparatistik Online* (September 2017): 60–86
- Brubaker, R 2020 Digital hyperconnectivity and the self, *Theory and Society* 49: 5–6, 771–801
- Chasar, M 2012 *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Chasar, M 2020 *Poetry Unbound: Poems and New Media from the Magic Lantern to Instagram*, New York City: Columbia University Press
- Cho, A 2015 Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time, in K Hillis, S Paasonen and M Petit (eds.), *Networked Affect*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 43–58
- Collins, J 2002 *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
- Eichhorn, K 2008 Archival genres: Gathering texts and reading spaces, *Invisible Culture* 12: 1–10
- Ferguson, D 2019 Poetry sales soar as political millennials search for clarity, *The Guardian* (21 January), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/21/poetry-sales-soar-as-political-millennials-search-for-clarity> (accessed 25 July 2023)
- Foucault, M 1983 *Self Writing: Hypomnemata*, foucault.info. n.d., <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.hypomnemata.en/> (accessed 27 October 2021)

- Freider, E 2022 I'm like a Pdf but a Girl: Girlblogging as a Nomadic Pedagogy. Honours thesis, London: Central Saint Martins University of the Arts
- Gopalakrishnan, A 2006 Web of Words: Poetry, Fandom and Globality. Masters thesis, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Lockridge, K 2004 Individual literacy in commonplace books, *Interchange* 34.2: 337–40
- Lorde, A 2018 Poetry is not a luxury, in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, London: Penguin Classics, 1–5
- Lynch, D 2018 Paper slips: Album, archiving, accident, *Studies in Romanticism* 57.1: 87–119
- Mayes, E 2010 Cultural capital and popular culture in Year 11 Standard English: Fostering student choice and synthesis, *English in Australia* 45.2: 47–54
- McCracken, A, A Cho, L Stein, and I Hoch 2020 You must be new here: An introduction, *A Tumblr Book*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1–22
- Murray, M 2014 Discovery: The new area of study for HSC English, *Scan: The Journal for Educators* 33.3: 39–44
- Murray, S 2018 *The Digital Literary Sphere*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Murray, S 2023 Dark Academia: Bookishness, readerly self-fashioning and the digital afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, *English Studies* 104.2: 347–64
- Pressman, J 2020 *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age*, West Sussex: Columbia University Press
- Rettberg, JW 2014 *Seeing Ourselves through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Rowberry, SP 2016 Commonplacing the public domain: Reading the classics socially on the Kindle, *Language and Literature* 25.3: 211–25
- Stein, LE 2017 Tumblr fan aesthetics, in MA Click & S Scott (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, Abingdon: Routledge, 86–97
- Tiidenberg, K, NA Hendry and C Abidin 2021 *Tumblr*, Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press
- Vuong, O and AR Spiegel 2017 On being generous in your work, *The Creative Independent* (15 May), <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/author-ocean-vuong-on-being-generous-in-your-work/> (accessed 15 January 2024)

---

### About the author

Axel-Nathaniel Rose is an author, editor, and teacher, undertaking his PhD in Creative Writing at UNSW. His work lies at the intersection of fandom studies and book history. His short stories, nonfiction, and poetry have been published in *Unsweetened Literary Journal*, *Tharunka*, and *Aesthetic*, and his plays have been performed by NUTS. He was the 2021 coordinator of *Unsweetened Literary Journal*.

---

# LYRICISM IN THE WORLD OF GEORGE SAND

Anne M Carson

RMIT, ORCID: 0000-0002-3064-1525

## Abstract

Lyric poetry's metier is figurative language – metaphor, simile and imagery – used to represent happenings at human/world intersections, and within the world and the individual, covering, as Jane Hirschfield writes, “both senses and psyche” (2015).<sup>1</sup> These affordances render it particularly suited to the writing of character in poetic biography.

The creative artefact from my creative writing PhD is a poetic biography of 19th century French social radical and prolific author, George Sand. As a work of ‘restitution poetics’ it proposes to contribute to repair of a creative, literary women’s lineage damaged by the exclusion or misrepresentation of women.

Sand’s multiple milieux lend themselves to lyric representation both in the variety of roles and settings she chose for herself, and in her own rich lyric representation of those worlds in her various writings. She straddled political worlds – lunch with the first minister, urgent correspondence with Napoléon’s nephew – as well as more personal settings – conversing with famous artists, writers, and musicians, love trysts, as well as the world of her country property.

“The language of the poem”, Mary Oliver avers, “is the language of particulars”<sup>2</sup> and particulars feature in the lyric and narrative modes I employ to hone in on Sand’s world, seeking to capture camembert-and-rough-red, chicken-ammonia, heart-piercing nightingales, rough Berrichon, and lined-foolscap-blue ink worlds. These are conveyed as strategies both to honour her, and to communicate her life in compelling visceral, sensory, and I hope, impactful ways.



## LYRICISM IN THE WORLD OF GEORGE SAND

Anne M Carson

As poets and theorists such as Glyn Maxwell (2012: 108–29) and Mary Oliver (1984: 19–34) demonstrate, lyric poetry combines language which is rich sonically (employing devices such as alliteration, consonance and assonance) and figuratively (using metaphor, simile and imagery) (Hirshfield 1998: 17). Such poems represent happenings at human/world intersections, within both the world, and the individual, covering, as Jane Hirshfield writes, ‘both senses and psyche’ (2015: 5). These affordances render it particularly suited to writing character in poetic biography.

The creative artefact from my PhD thesis is a poetic biography of 19th-century French author, George Sand (1804–1867). Social radical, prolific and innovative novelist and playwright, colleague, friend and source of inspiration to the literary elite of her time, she was considered by many critics to be the leading literary figure in her day (Cate 1975: 5). However she has become better known for breaking dress, behaviour and social role conventions. Critics, particularly English-speaking critics such as Henry James, have used such superficialities to discredit her (Dickenson 1988: 168–72). In addition, genre remapping by the Sorbonne shortly after her death led to the genre in which many considered she wrote – ‘idealism’ – becoming devalued, and ‘realist’ modes (by authors such as Stendhal and Balzac) gaining in ascendancy (Schor 1993: 25; Cohen 1999: 5). Harsh Marxist judgments of literary idealism as ‘reactionary, nostalgic, or elitist’ (White 2015: 63) continued into the 20th century by writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (see Léon 1993: 9), meaning that outside France and the academy, Sand has largely been forgotten. The inaccuracy of Marxist judgments is demonstrated by Sand’s practical socialism, in that she provided financial and nutritional support for forty peasant families (Dickenson 1988: 95; Cate 1975: 548) and the so-called ‘proletarian poets’ (Dickenson 1988: 95), and gave away over one million pounds during the course of her life to those in need (Dickenson 1988: 3). In an innovative politico-literary strategy, she also sought to valorise agricultural rural workers by featuring characters such as an orphan, miller, hemp-worker and other related occupations as protagonists in her ‘rustic’ novels (White 2015: 64).

I have coined the term ‘restitution poetics’ to describe my poetic biography practice; inflected with reparative elements, my work proposes repair of a literary women’s lineage such as advocated by feminists including American activist Robin Morgan who coined the term ‘Herstory’ (n.d. 9), and French philosopher Luce Irigaray who wrote of a ‘genealogy of women’ (1987: 19). This lineage has been damaged by the exclusion or misrepresentation of women such as Sand. My poetic sequence seeks to contribute to efforts to ‘remember’ Sand, to write ‘herstory’. Writing at the intersection of lyric and narrative modes, I intend to further previous Sandian prose biographies by maximising the immediacy of first-person voices (Sand’s as well as the voices of many in her orbit), conveying a sense both of her subjectivity, and that of figures around her, regardless of class or social standing.

Sand’s multiple milieux lend themselves to lyric representation both in the variety of roles and settings she chose for herself, and in her own rich lyrical representation of those worlds in various writings. Indeed, her adept use of lyric detail in both novels and autobiographical works gives me insight into her creative imagination and forms the basis of my feeling of creative kinship with her. Sand’s straddling of political worlds – as informal Propaganda Minister, lunching with the first minister, penning communiqués to *le Peuple*, and conducting urgent

correspondence with Napoléon's nephew advocating for colleagues – is rich poetic biographical terrain. As is her familiarity with both her paternal grandmother's chateau and estate, and the cottages of local tenant farmers and peasants. Sand was the friend of famous artists, writers, and musicians; she conducted love affairs and trysts, alongside running the Nohant estate, and being mother of two children and subsequently grandmother.

'The language of the poem', Mary Oliver avers, 'is the language of particulars' (1994: 92), and particulars feature in the lyric and narrative modes I employ to hone in on Sand's worlds. Lyric detail seeks to capture milieux such as camembert-and-rough-red, chicken-ammonia, heart-piercing nightingales, rough Berrichon dialect, and lined-foolscap-and-blue-ink worlds. Narrative elements are comprised of the events which unfold the timeline of her life – her father dying, her years in a convent, her marriage, the publication of her books; and provide the 'sinew that moves the poem forward' (Hirshfield 1998: 26). Synergistically combined, these poetic modes are conveyed in my poetic biography as strategies both to honour her, and to communicate her life in compelling visceral, sensory and, I hope, impactful ways.

### Works cited

- Bachelard, Gaston 1971 [1960] *The Poetics of Reverie*, New York, Beacon Publishers
- Cate, Curtis 1975 *George Sand: A Biography*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin
- Cohen, Margaret 1999 *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Dickenson, Donna 1988 *George Sand: A Brave Man – The Most Womanly Woman*, Oxford: Berg Publishers
- Hirshfield, Jane 1998 *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, New York: Harper Perennial
- Hirshfield, Jane 2015 *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*, New York: Alfred A Knopf
- Irigaray, Luce, 1987 *Sexes and Genealogies*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Léon, Céline T 1993 Simone De Beauvoir on the writings of women, *Simone De Beauvoir Studies* 10: 5–14
- Mathis, Charles-François 2014 Nation and nature preservation in France and England in the nineteenth century, *Environment and History* 20.1: 9–39,
- Maxwell, Glyn 2012 *On Poetry*, London: Oberon Books
- Morgan, Robin n.d. *Robin Morgan: Author* [website] <https://www.robinmorgan.net/activism/> (retrieved 18 July 2023)
- Oliver, Mary 1994 *A Poetry Handbook*, Florida: Harcourt Brace
- Sand, George 1991 *Story of My Life: The Autobiography of George Sand: A Group Translation*, New York: State University of New York Press
- Schor, Naomi 1993 *George Sand and Idealism*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Waddingham, Patrick 1981 *Turgenev and George Sand: An Improbable Entente*, London: Macmillan Press
- White, Claire 2015 Sensuous Communism: Sand with Marx, *Comparative Literature* 67.1): 62–78

## 9 POEMS FOR OUT OF THE ORDINARY

### *Aurore is terrified of the legs of death*

1808, Nohant

It is the day of  
Papa's funeral.

I have no idea  
about the finality

of death.  
I think he has

died all over again.  
I don't want

the black stockings  
put on me.

They terrify  
me. I think

they are putting  
*the legs of death*

on me.<sup>3</sup>  
I only allow

them after mama  
shows me

she too wears  
them and tells

me all the house  
will wear black.

### The author imagines Aurore's convent experience, aroma by aroma

1817–1820, Convent Dames Augustines Anglaises, Paris

Soil's wholesome tannins and loams  
 kicked up by our feet as we run and romp

in the convent yard The wafting floral bouquet  
 from stands of spring-flowering chestnuts

Girls' unwashed bodies the ripeness of rarely laundered  
 habits In the laundry sour starch

and clean crisp linen smells The misery of mean dim space  
 choking on the ammonia stench of the poultry yard

and the reek of fire-smoke and coal In the chapel a distinctive vanilla  
 pungency of molten candlewax when praying for days at a time

she burns mystical union A whole laboratory  
 filled with the aromatics of mint distillation

heady botanical fragrances sweet menthol freshness Balm to her  
 In later life whenever she brushes against the bush

in her own garden memories ignite  
 and she is that cloistered perfumed school girl once more.

### George Sand describes her dagger

1833, Paris

Barley sugar handle  
 scabbarded blade

The feel of power in  
 my hand I wonder

have I the nerve? it  
 warms in my clasp

inspires confidence  
 in lanes and byways

When I first meet de  
 Musset he devours



me with his eyes  
spies it dangling

from my cummerbund  
Flushed with flirting

at soiree end the dagger  
is swallowed by my

skirt's dark folds.

### The author reflects on George Sand's novels

As innocuous-looking as the jubes and  
jellies ladies enjoyed nibbling French ladies

devoured them in salons across the country  
sitting on chaises by the fire German ladies

read them in *Wohnzimmers* Even across the channel  
blushing English ladies read them in drawing rooms

with pots of tea steaming Aristocratic  
Russian ladies (samovars on standby)

could not get enough of them Nothing  
for husbands or censors to worry about

Brought into the home (that most contested  
domain) sometimes even husbands

themselves picked up copies on their way  
back A slow burn installment

by instalment in journals innocently left  
on occasional tables and bureaux

Scattered around chateaux/manor houses/estates/  
dachas/cottages for all to see Everyone

agreed it was good for ladies to have something  
to do while husbands worked

servants ran the home      and children  
 studied with tutors      Sand never

passed up the opportunity      of packing dynamite  
 into simple love stories      sweet pastoral

tales      rousing Utopian novels      heroines  
 and heroes ready to explode convention

narrow mindedness      discrimination      Under  
 the cover of *divertissement*      warrior-ideas

ready to leap out      open the gates      Like  
 the Trojans      who saw it coming?

### The author imagines George Sand picnicking with Lamartine

1850? Paris

Chicken, hard-boiled eggs,  
 camembert, baguettes, and

a single glass of rough *vin  
 rouge*. Lamartine and you

together on the grass outside  
 the Ministry – towering trees

and the scent of fresh mown  
 grass to wipe away the rigours

of rule. Oh, to find themselves  
 in such new guise; two old

pals – first and unofficial  
 eleventh ministers.

### The press declares my *Villemer* 'a triumph'!

1864, The premiere of *Le Marquis de Villemer*, Paris

Come opening night, carriages line up outside  
 the Odéon, and four or five thousand students

assail the Catholic Club and the Jesuits next door!  
They chant *Vive Villemer! Vive George Sand!*

Taunting orthodoxy. Two thousand are turned  
away at the Box Office. Constables hand-to-hand

hold back supporters from unhitching my carriage  
hauling me triumphantly all the way to Rue Racine!

*Vive George Sand!* Their words ring in my ears  
obliterating rehearsals which had not gone well

the leading man fighting with the leading woman  
the sets – execrable. *Mon Dieu!* Still shaken by

the flop of my last three plays. Amazed then  
at dress rehearsal when everyone wipes tears

away – ooooh Caroline! Oooh Didier! Ooooh  
*le Marquis!* Not just stagehands (who always love

to weep with the leading lady) but musicians and  
fire-men – tears even course down the gas-lighters’

cheeks! What heart it gives me. But discovering  
Emperor Napoléon and Empress Eugenie will be

in the house ratchets my nerves. I’m torn between  
fear that pious Catholics will boo again en masse

and a candle-flicker of hope that maybe this time  
respect might prevail. And then the last curtain falls

and opening night is over. *Flaubert cries like a woman<sup>4</sup>*  
*and the Prince claps enough for thirty claqueurs!*

Mobbed when I enter the lobby – the press of bodies  
well-wishers’ kisses, and such eloquent outpourings

of *bonhomie* that all my faith in *le peuple* is restored.  
Along with faith in my own abilities. Through

the simple act of scratching away, chicken-like,  
day after day, telling my humble, rousing tales.

### George Sand joins a committee

1872, Paris

Green has always been my métier – trees,  
grass, leaves and fronds, forage and herbs

of every verdant hue. But progress is not  
*verde*, it is the *gris* of concrete quarries

and smoke, engines and locomotives.  
Development steams across landscapes,

threatens our green patrimony under its  
metal wheels. A group of us writers join

to protect the forest we love, the trees we  
shelter under, the green we hunger for.

We call ourselves the *Comité de protection  
artistique de la forêt de Fontainebleau*.

I pen a manifesto – *Fontainebleau Forest  
should be considered among the ancient*

*and national monuments that must be  
preserved for the admiration of artists*

*and tourists.*<sup>5</sup> In thicket, copse and glade,  
along arboreal avenues, among stands of

beech and hornbeam, pine and ancient  
oak. In *plein-air*, we find our sylvan selves.



### George Sand talks about the drapes

History thus makes use of everything: a merchant's bill,  
a cookbook, a laundry list; that is how twenty-seven lengths  
of green velvet can inform the history of humankind.<sup>6</sup>

George Sand

*A word moves about in the shadows  
and swells the draperies.*<sup>7</sup> Louis Emié

Deep green, redolent of forest and fir  
tree. Nap lush enough to run your fingers  
through. Grandmama bought them to  
re-drape the whole chateau – twenty-  
seven length for all the mullioned windows  
for all the terrace doors. To dress  
them in finery, to bring hints of foliage  
inside. But her last illness overcame  
her plans. Instead they led a sheltered  
life, not swinging in scent-laden summer  
days as expected. Not absorbing angry  
recriminations grandmamma and mama  
flung at each other, fighting over me in  
the salon. Not sheltering me in my boudoir  
as I wrote through the cold shiver of  
winter nights. Saved the ravages of moths,  
the indignity of retirement, saved the  
chagrin of replacement – new, younger  
drapes with nap still springy and thick.  
They slept the revolution through, folded  
and fallow, missed the messy loves-gone-  
wrong, drunken confessions, squeals  
of children at play. Deep in their cotton  
sleeves, they slumbered through the decades,

hidden in Grandmama's camphor chest.  
After my death, Solange's daughter, Aurore,  
  
found them, shook out the dust and restored  
them to glory. Now they hang where Grand-  
  
mama always intended, verdant picture –  
window framing. Deep within their knowing,  
  
in the way of inanimate things; witnessing,  
absorbing. Green inside and out.

[Previously published in *Westerly* 64.2, November 2019]

### The peasants of Nohant write on George Sand's death

Placed with a wreath on her tomb  
1876, Nohant

This is from  
the peasants  
of Nohant  
for thanks to  
*her*, no-one  
here was poor.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jane Hirshfield, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*. Alfred A Knopf, New York: 2015, 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*. Harcourt Brace, Florida: 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> Sand 1991: 464.
- <sup>4</sup> Sand, in Cate 1975: 675.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Charles-François Mathis 2014 (n.p).
- <sup>6</sup> Sand 1991: 119.
- <sup>7</sup> Louis Emié, Le nom du feu, in Bachelard 1971: 49.
- <sup>8</sup> Waddingham 1981: 103.

---

## About the author

Anne M Carson is a poet, essayist and visual artist whose poetry has been published internationally, and widely in Australia, receiving numerous awards including shortlisting in the Newcastle Poetry Prize (2022). *The Detective's Chair* (Liquid Amber Press, 2023) is her fourth poetry collection. Her work has been broadcast on national and community radio and she has curated a programme of poems on disability on ABC's Poetica programme. She has initiated a number of poetry-led social justice projects, including *The River Project Soiree* and the *Second Bite poetry Prize*. She has recently passed her PhD in Creative Writing at (RMIT, 2023).

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/y24iua7rdw  
**Keywords:** poetry

## POEM

Emilie Collyer

*RMIT*, ORCID: 0000-0003-4572-3571



## WITH JANE

*Emilie Collyer*

I

I have driven this road many times where  
Calder Freeway curves around the racetrack  
servo stop for scalding cardboard tea, past  
eery bluestone sentinels and cluster  
demountables scattered like stones. Foot ease  
pedal, half an eye on rear view mirror  
to monitor what encroaches. It is  
always autumn on this road, yellow leaf  
light bathes my face, softening the edges  
of who I imagine myself to be.  
Once, I thought to move here, that a new life  
away from my life would open something –  
cool earth smell of twilight – but I couldn't  
not get back in the car, didn't know any  
other way than the tyre-worn freeway home.

II

She is not an owl nor an empress.  
I circle these words search images online.  
Powerful Owls are large eat about one  
possum per night are sometimes sighted

in the suburbs. The Empress holds a  
sceptre sits on a throne wears a crown  
sometimes she is pregnant. If an owl  
appeared next to me and sat I would

hold my breath try to be a good  
owl companion. If the Empress was  
surveying her empire this picture of  
woman and owl might please her.

She is not an empress nor an owl. I  
wait. Hoping the right words drop in.

III

We met in the sunlit room  
with dusty windows  
It's called The Tower

of London  
Rapunzel  
Tarot sudden change

falling  
how a new friend

tumbles us  
anew

## Note

*This suite is written in response to an interview I conducted in 2021 with playwright, novelist, writer and researcher Jane Harrison, a descendant of the Muruwari people of New South Wales, about feminist writing practice. I am a non-Indigenous playwright and poet, descended from Scottish and German settlers.*

## Contextual statement

As part of my PhD research into feminist creative practice, I have interviewed a small number of writers from my community of practice. These are women writers working across or between poetry, theatre and prose who have been practising for more than ten years. I am trying to know something about how feminist practice is understood, valued, and sustained.

I have been making poetic accounts of these encounters, testing how language and the page can hold the effable and ineffable trace of what happens between two writers when they talk about writing. Ahmed writes about 'feminism as poetry' and how we can 'reassemble histories by putting them into words' (Ahmed 2017: 12). I have experimented with different ways of writing from and about these interviews in my effort to poetically render the many ways women writers build and maintain creative practice over a long time. I create new poems to engage with the materiality of the interview data and to render the different ways I am connected with my interlocutors. I explore different poetic forms to bring my relationship with these 'co-creators' into conversation with my relationship to poetry.

I draw on Vickery's writing about the particularities of the poetic trace whereby 'the trace offers the possibility of tracking the poet in the world', and the way in which this trace suggests memory 'but cannot provide permanency or fixity' (Vickery 2013: 9). One of my aims with this poetic tracing is to capture something of the contingent activity that is 'encountering a writer in conversation', recalling it, and writing about it. Where a more standardly written interview may present as a 'truthful record' of an encounter with a writer, to 'fix' them to their writing or politics, poetry does the opposite of this. Via its particularity of voice, by form, by what is left out, by use of white space and the line, a poetic approach suggests multiplicity of meaning and provides space for the reader to enter and engage. I engage with a feminist standpoint approach whereby I am present in the poetic works I make, rather than being a remote or passive interviewer.

I write poetry to interrupt narratives; ones I have inherited, internalised, ones that seem loud, demanding, singular and lacking in nuance. Poetry permits other ways to hear and see who we are to each other, to introduce surprise and peel open new ways of understanding. This short suite of poems aims to place memory, connection, and inheritance on the page to shake up what feminist creative practice looks like and to show its myriad forms.

## Works cited

Ahmed S 2017 *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham: Duke University Press

Vickery A 2013 To hold the hole: Poetry and the trace, in J Hawke & A Vickery (eds), *Poetry and the Trace*, Glebe: Puncher and Wattman, 9–23

---

### About the author

Emilie Collyer lives in Australia on unceded Wurundjeri Country. Her writing is published and produced widely. Her poetry collection *Do you have anything less domestic?* (Vagabond Press 2022) won the inaugural Five Islands Press Prize. Her plays have won and been nominated for multiple awards including Theatre503 International Playwriting (London), Patrick White, Green Room and Malcolm Roberston. Emilie is a PhD candidate at RMIT (Naarm/Melbourne) where she is researching feminist creative practice.

---





**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/sucww1nvn  
**Keywords:** poetry, trauma, poetic practice,  
recovery, agency, survivable resistance

# POETRY AS PRESENCE: WORKING WITH PERSONAE

## A Survivor's Manifesto on Poetic Practice

Claire Gaskin

ORCID: 0000-0001-8272-9660

### Abstract

This piece adopts the voice of public declaration to assert poetic practice as *survivable resistance* to abuses of power. It proposes that poetry is the best means to identify, expose and reconfigure what is implicit in dominant discourses that discredit the way a survivor of sexual assault may communicate. It is found that a poetic use of language that is allusive, evocative and associative can reinvigorate annihilated perspectives so as to add them to public discourse. Poetic methods can be employed to resist and subvert the supposed supremacy of linear and logical narrative structures considered essential for sense making and validity. Furthermore, they can be employed to excavate family and state histories to resurrect, sometimes from fragments, the perspectives of those that have been silenced.

## POETRY AS PRESENCE: WORKING WITH PERSONAE: A SURVIVOR'S MANIFESTO ON POETIC PRACTICE

Claire Gaskin

*This piece comes with a content warning. It intersects with trauma studies.*

*Prose writes something with language. Poetry does something to language.*

– Niccole Brossard

I write myself into existence as proof of survival, as proof of unbroken consciousness.

My poetic practice validates how I, as a survivor of childhood sexual assault, communicate. A survivor often communicates through the placement and juxtaposition of fragments to explore the connections between the seemingly disparate. Identifying the relationship between fragments counters disconnection. This creative practice brings living presence into becoming via recognition of interdependence. A survivor often communicates with intensity and is involved in sense making through the poetic creative practices of evocation, allusion, and association. A survivor frequently expresses their story 'in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility', writes Judith Herman (2001: 1). I argue that the way a survivor communicates with recourse to poetic devices is both valid and a valuable means to create new systems out of the broken. This essay examines poetry as a tool to create an experience of presence for a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. A means to create systems that include rather than exclude, that are full of potential and possibility, reflecting multiplicity and coexistence. Poetic practice can function as a survivable resistance to erasure. Survivable in that it is about liveability in terms of tolerance to coexistence.

Poetic practices can be employed to resist and subvert the supremacy of linear and logical narrative. The privileging of the linear and logical can be used to dismiss other methods of communication and expression. A survivor of childhood sexual abuse does not necessarily have a linear narrative, which is a privilege commonly experienced by people who assume their experience is the definitive and therefore most logical perspective. There are dominant cultural stories, such as 'hard work will always lead to wealth'; this type of perspective discredits those who work hard and do not become wealthy. A survivor commonly does not experience cause and effect as reflected in this logical and linear sequencing. Similarly, the dominant narrative that the patriarchal nuclear family model is essential to the safety of individuals and the functioning of society invalidates and often silences survivors of childhood sexual assault. A survivor frequently does not have access to a clear story, logical sequencing and causality having been broken by trauma. Naomi Guttman writes this is problematic because the way a survivor is involved in sense making is up against 'a dominant mythology which is ready to privilege the voice of easy communication' (1996: 1). It is a privilege to assume cause and effect, or beginning, middle and end, in terms of action/agency and outcome. Poetic practice can be

employed to excavate family and state histories, and resurrect, sometimes from fragments, the perspectives of those who have been silenced by the ruling sense makers who demand consistence and coherence defined as adherence to dominant narratives.

Poetic creative practice is a form of sense making that allows for multiplicity and coexistence. Poetry is a place where contradictions can co-exist and the highly intense can be held. Poetry gathers, as opposed to defining and categorising, through the poetic power of ambiguity. Ambiguity allows for 'alternative interpretations' so the movement is not in a linear direction from the unknown to the known: it can move from the known to the unknown, and one meaning can undo another to incorporate the unknowable (Eagleton 2007: 165). Poetic ambiguity works through inclusion as opposed to exclusion. It gathers meanings in an and/both approach as opposed to an either/or approach that works through definitively defining and categorising. Definitively defining and categorising can be reductionist in that it works through the exclusion of meanings. Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains this as a 'both/and vision born of shift, contraries, negations, contradictions; linked to personal vulnerability and need' (1990: 6). Through pitch and pace, we can have a visceral experience. This visceral experience is a form of knowledge. The pantoum with its hypnotic repetition of lines is described as a hawk, in that it circles and 'takes its time about striking' (Preminger 1993: 875). Repeating lines in different positions contextualises and decontextualises at the same time as associating: the 'cross rhymes scissor the couplets', with 'different themes being developed concurrently' (Preminger 1993: 876). Meaning can move from a central point to associate via sound repetitions and rhythms across stanzas and lines along multiple radiuses. In a sestina the repeated word is the centre that radiates in different directions: 'the same ideas, the same objects, occur to the mind in a succession of different aspects' (Comte de Gramont, in Preminger 1993: 1146). They occur in the mind because they occur in the word; it is the relationship between the two that creates the occurrence. This co-occurrence needs to be understood to understand that the word can be radial in poetic practice. It is the relationship, the exchange, the multi-directionality that is co-occurrence. The same words or lines or sounds in different contexts 'nonetheless resemble one another': they associate; they are 'fluid and changing shape like the clouds in the sky' (Gramont, in Preminger 1993: 1146). The sestina has been described as 'folding and infolding upon itself' (Ezra Pound, in Preminger 1993: 1146). Poetry can be radial not linear, gathering meanings as it includes and incorporates.

**Ismene reads her psych's book on dissociation**

the mattress holds the heat of the mind haunted  
the dream-rivers reason with the tree roots to remember  
the cradle flinches in the breeze fracturing  
holding through the night of nights de-realised  
this journey does not involve going anywhere fragmented  
my mind outside my body having a body is to blame

pulling the rip cord of silk self-blame  
not present feels like I am ghosting haunting  
my skin alight with the pain of a refrain fragment  
blood to forgiveness throbbing in my knuckles remembered  
narratives run through my fingers de-realised  
time calculated in the imprint of my face as the clay fractures

the stone dropped into the pool of my pelvis fracturing  
I forgive you father for you have sinned and are to blame  
the glass of water on the window sill reacting to the foundations de-realised  
I am matter I do matter I am a spirit haunted  
thrown into the sea of ancestors remembered  
my feet are rubbed out as the waves fragment

the ticking of the passing bike in winking time fragments  
I see the effect but not the cause fracturing  
the floors worn through in a puddle of raw wood to remember  
my hands mangled birds the weather blames  
you cannot perceive the imperceptible through perception but meaning is a haunting  
awareness is one thing action is another substituting is depersonalisation

disintegration of identity experience de-realised  
how traumatised people talk in sentence fragments  
a demolished base is not a safe haunt  
scenes flash topic switching and my credibility fractures  
the two major tasks in life are to love and to work not to be blamed  
the more severe the less remembered

I fight through the curtains to get into my psych's room to remember  
the smell in the dark of my mother's wardrobe their bedroom depersonalised  
it's harder to be autonomous when the culpable don't take the blame  
in murky water hair in waving reeds submerged trees and bone fragments  
on the surface of the lake the clouds fracture  
wanting it to be other than it is doesn't stop the truth haunting

a poem is re-membering in collaged fragments  
limits de-realised from forming fatigue fractures  
a child with no outline feels to blame it is an oceanic haunting

(Gaskin 2021: 31)

A survivor often communicates with recourse to the poetic practices of pause and silence. A survivor commonly makes connections between fragments of memory. It is the space and silences between the fragments that allows the associated sensations to connect the fragments. This can reunite the effect with the cause, working from associated sensation to their cause. These pauses and silences can allow space for invocation of what and who, what sense of self, has been destroyed by trauma. Similarly, poetry works through the generative power of incorporating space and silences. Luce Irigaray writes, 'It is thanks to silence that the other as other can exist or be, and the two be maintained' (2008: 5). Silence and space are generative; they can bring presence into being through union. Dualities and contradictions do not cancel each other out, they act as possibilities towards recovery and discovery of cause and effect. Poetry is not static; it is in constant flux; it ignites thinking and is 'an availability for that which has not yet occurred' writes Irigaray (2008: 18). It is visceral. There is knowing that is felt before being understood: 'poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought',

writes Audrey Lorde (1984: 37). Poetry is uniquely placed to be a powerful tool holding what is too intense to contain, the contradictory and fragmentary.

Poetry functions as one means to accept what is known but is under pressure of not being believed. Poetry can be 'the movement between three main sequences: from forgetting to remembering, from silence to speech (the testimony process), and from dissolution of the self to its cohesiveness', writes Bella Sagi (2021: 154). A survivor can utilise poetic means to claim unclaimed experience and grieve the initial loss of agency.

Poetry can be formative in establishing agency. Being mercurial, being ambiguous and allusive, can be a poetic means to escape the seemingly inescapable and survive. Poetic devices can be employed to excavate and express what has been denied because it contradicts the existing social and cultural edicts. Verena Andermatt Conley writes of Hélène Cixous' thinking that 'to change existing social structures, the linguistic clichés that purvey them and make them appear as transparent, immutable truths must be detected, re-marked, displaced' (Conley 1984: 5). Linguistic clichés that discredit the experience of a survivor must be reconfigured. Poetry can be about 'the subversion of coded, clichéd, ordinary language – necessary to social transformation' (Conley 1984: 5). To expose and identify this oppressive use of language is to employ creative practice to gain agency.

It is the nature of abuse of power, such as sexual abuse, that the abuser is treating the abused as an object with no agency. An abuser is acting as a narcissist. Julia Kristeva writes that, for the narcissist, 'The object of love is a metaphor for the subject' (1987: 30). I am not writing about love when I am writing about abuse, however; I am writing about the fact of an abuser treating the abused as an object. For the narcissist, the other exists to reflect them; other is forbidden to be other. When the abuse has occurred in childhood, before individuation, the survivor has no sense of self outside of being an object for use and abuse. A survivor is often silenced and discredited when they speak. Poetry can function as 'an alternative to forbidden speech, which is evident whether consciously by keeping the secret or unconsciously by internalizing the aggressor' writes Sagi (2021: 153). A survivor may not have a separate entity individuated from the aggressor; only the aggressor's intentions and motivations are present. Lack of agency and autonomy can be experienced as the inertia of depression. Kristeva writes, 'My depression points to my not knowing how to lose – I have been perhaps unable to find a valid compensation for the loss? It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being – and Being itself' (1989: 5). For a survivor, a relationship to personae, to self as subject with agency, must be formed from nothing, from never having had it. You cannot know how to lose if you have not known self-possession, so every loss is experienced as a total loss, a loss of being.

Poetry is a means to knowledge and a means to forming a relationship between self as subject and object. A self that can act and act upon. When the dominant narrative erases your perception and denies your memories and distorts and dissociates cause and effect, then you need to see the associations between disparate fragments, you need to create connections to experience presence. Poetry can hold the intensity of pain that is this loss of being. It is 'a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted poetry to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight', writes Lorde (1984: 37). To be autonomous there needs to be a self in relationship with self-representation and individuated experience.



Creative practice involves writing, then reading what has been written. The reading self proves the writing self, as perceivable and relational. Poetic metaphor can act as an 'associative bridge between the explicit and the implicit' writes Sagi (2021: 159), between self as writer and self as reader. Sagi writes of metaphor that it 'constitutes a bridge between detached and dissociative parts' (2021: 158), a means to make sense of the deeply fragmented complexities of traumatic experience. It is seeing the connections between the fragments and what story they tell. 'There is trauma, loss, the abyss, and there is something else also, a coexistence of the fragments in a shared proximity', writes Morgan Yasbincek (2023: 111). The creative practice of metaphor, comparison via coexistence, can be utilised as a powerful means to form relationships between the seemingly disparate and disconnected.

Poetic practice is the relationship between two happenings, being and coming into being via a relationship between self as both subject and object. However, I do not have to identify with anything I have written. As soon as I have written it I have changed. Butler writes that, 'I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is enigmatic traces of others' (2006: 46). Similarly, there are 'enigmatic traces' of other selves, including those that have not yet come into being (Butler 2006: 46). The self is not static. My writing represents a temporary self at best. Yet, importantly, it is a perceivable and irreducible self. The space between myself as reader and myself as writer keeps shifting and shaping my becoming. Writing is breathing out and reading what I have written is breathing in, a relational and living presence.

#### **What does it mean to require what breaks you**

– Judith Butler

Break on the rocks, breaking and reforming to break again. Brake. The drama is burning the limits of love. When he Freudianly texted that he could do with a hit instead of a hug I knew not to go over. Addiction is when my choice is gone. Desire or historical harm can activate. Motherless and not mine marriage and convention do not believe in me. I can only do the impossible. Everything dripping with continuity, water, the currawong call, the magpie warble. Everything aches in the rain, the joints between words and the space between breaths. I was formed by breaking against those that would break me. The moments that wake me to love, that I am not a mistake. So when I am formless and need to reform I need to resist this tidal pull. Breaking with those that broke me. So tied to the page, the home page, the sparrows fly above head level, land on chair backs as I land writing the continuous present. The light aches for prayer as awareness displaces denial. An angel streaming water hand to hand as evening is spooned into the back bar. I'm drunk on too much too soon and the death of not knowing. How do you communicate something multiple. The clarity of collision, as soon as you acknowledge what you have you are losing it. Only the unnamed has the power to exist without boundaries. A sparrow and me at the long table, its Happy Hour, the bartender polishes glasses, finally three friends enter chatting oblivious to the cathedral of echoing. (Gaskin 2021: 67)

Writing is witness to consciousness, to existence. This counters dissociation experienced as non-existence. This is largely achieved via placement of fragments of memory image and sensation in a poetic creative practice of juxtaposition. Marlene NourbeSe Philip writes, 'the fragment allows for the imagination to complete its missing aspects – we can talk, therefore, of the poetics of fragmentation' (2008: 202). Similarly, the poetics of space and placement of

fragments within a whole can invoke missing facets through allusion. The incompleteness of a fragment allows for allusion to what is missing or to what has been erased. Gervasio calls this method 'redactive reading':

Redactive reading calls upon the reader to infer what – and who – is not present in a decanonical work through two rhetorical moves: the text's core interest in disarming canons, evident in the preponderance of referents to actors spanning myth and history and the subsequent concatenation of meanings that can be derived from the allusions. (Gervasio 2019: 6–7)

The reader that Gervasio refers to can also be the writer in pursuit of validating their own knowledges and being via poetic invocation, evocation, association and allusion. Yasbincek writes that 'Fragmented writing enacts its own breaking/loss and so the effects of trauma, shock, violences of speaking and silence are evidenced on the page' (2023: 111). At the same time, however, 'The fragment accepts her wounding, shows her how to bear it, reference its mystery' (2023: 111). To be incomplete allows forever coming into being. It is not definitive or static; it is vital and living. The mystery, the unknowable, allow for a living relationship between being and becoming. Through poetic ambiguity we have a model for coexistence, multiplicity, a tolerance for the intensely felt, the contradictory. It is about the potentiality and possibility in the unknown and unknowable. If we want a future that does not repeat the abuses of the past, we need to not repeat the premises of that abuse. We need to stop privileging the intellectual and supposed logical. We need to stop negating the emotional and viscerally felt. The emotionally intense and the visceral are a means to new or resurrected knowledges. The employment of the evocative, allusive, and associative of poetic practice can return to language what has been erased through abuses of power. Through metaphor's power to make connections between dissociated parts we can heal the split between what we know but is under socialised pressure of not being believed and what we are socialised to believe but know is not true. We need to look to survivors who know how to build a liveable world through identifying, exposing, and reconfiguring the premises that enable abuse of power. We need to look to survivors who understand the importance of self as other and self and other co-existing and sharing power for mutual survival. We need to look to survivors of abuse of power as leaders, because their survival is evidence of a survivable resistance that envisions and enacts the respect of other as a necessity for liveability. Poetry is a means to radial connections that resist the danger of the singular static perspective. The irreducibility of the self is reflected in poetic practice. At the same time, the return of the fragmentary and intensely felt to language acts as witness to unbroken presence. Poetry is a means to awareness and presence through connectivity, through its ability to bring the intellectual and emotional into union. I write myself into existence as proof of survival, as proof of unbroken consciousness.

### Works cited

- Butler, J 2006 *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso
- Conley, VA 1984 *Helene Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press
- DuPlessis, RB 1990 *The Pink Guitar*, New York: Routledge
- Eagleton, T 2007 *How to Read a Poem*, Carlton Vic.: Blackwell Publishing
- Gaskin, C 2021 *Ismene's Survivable Resistance*, Waratah, NSW: Puncher and Wattmann
- Gervasio, N 2019 The ruth in (t)ruth: Redactive reading and feminist provocations to history in M Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 30.2: 1–29
- Guttman, N 1996 Dream of the mother language: Myth and history in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, *MELUS* (The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States) 21.3: 53–68
- Herman, JL 2001 *Trauma and Recovery*, London: Pandora
- Irigaray, L 2008 *Sharing the World* (trans J Still), London: Continuum
- Kristeva, J 1987. *Tales of Love* (trans Leon S Roudiez), New York: Columbia University Press
- Kristeva, J 1989 *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (trans Leon S Roudiez), New York: Columbia University Press
- Lorde, A 1984 *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press
- Philip, MN 2008 Defending the dead, confronting the archive: A conversation with M Nourbese Philip and Patricia Saunders, *Small Axe* 12.2: 63–79
- Preminger, A and TVF Brogan (eds) 1993 *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Sagi, B 2021 Only when it's written here: Personal writing as testimony in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 34.3: 150–63
- Yasbincek, M 2023 *coming to nothing*, Newcastle: Puncher & Wattmann

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this work was written, Bunurong/Boonwurrung country, and heartfully pay my respects to all Traditional Custodians who may read this article. Sovereignty has never been ceded. This land was taken by force and is retained by force. If we want a future that does not repeat the abuses of the past, we need to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Custodians.

---

### About the author

Claire Gaskin's first full-length collection of poetry, *a bud*, was completed in the receipt of an Australia Council Literature Board (now Creative Australia) grant. *A bud* was released by John Leonard Press in 2006 and shortlisted in the John Bray SA Festival Awards for Literature in 2008. Her subsequent poetry collections are *Paperweight* (2013), *Eurydice Speaks* (2021) and *Ismene's Survivable Resistance* (2021). Her poetry collection *Weather Event* (Gazebo Books) is forthcoming. Her poetry has been anthologised in *Australian Poetry 2009*, *Motherlode*, *Australian Love Poems 2013*, *Best Australian Poems 2009, 2010, 2013* and in *Contemporary Australian Poetry* and *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry*. Claire Gaskin holds a PhD in Writing and Literature from Deakin University.

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/dybmnbwzx7  
**Keywords:** poetry, writing, disability,  
feminism, body

# REFLECTIONS ON WRITING AND DISABILITY

Susan Hawthorne

## **Abstract**

Much of my fiction and poetry has been a long wrestle with the Pythia, the prophetic snake at Delphi. A figure who slides in and out of consciousness. The mythic imagery associated with her includes Eurydice who is unable to leave the underworld. She represents the dislocation of the post-seizure state and her return to status epilepticus. The poems and text in this essay are an attempt to write what is barely writable.



## REFLECTIONS ON WRITING AND DISABILITY

Susan Hawthorne

### unstuck

coming unstuck from the body  
mind floating so far  
not even string  
to hold it in place

mind wanders the universe  
rambling between galaxies  
into a dark dark darkness  
with just an edge of purple

it's the purple that brings  
her mind back to earth  
the energy ravelling and shining  
with passion

she returns to the accompaniment  
of a low base note  
a wave rolling across  
the earth from a black hole somewhere

Coming unstuck from the body is what occurs during a major epileptic seizure. Three days lost just like that. I have lost many parts of days throughout my life, but just twice had three days of underworld existence. I search for images not imbued with Christian imagery and find Eurydice.

### Eurydice

Orpheus sings as he returns  
from the dead.

Eurydice cries out, Don't  
leave me here like this.

Eurydice's eyes are dry  
with fear and anger

As darkness closes in on her  
once again.

Eurydice is caught in a *status epilepticus* in which consciousness might be temporarily regained and then the seizure comes yet again. How to write the unwritable? The darkness that cannot be breached by Orpheus, son of Apollo. Can Eurydice ever leave the underworld? In the

mythic tradition, it is said that she stood on a viper and died when Aristaeus pursued her (with intentions of raping her?). Ovid suggests that she was dancing with naiads on her wedding day when she accidentally trod on the snake (1955: 225). Was this a way of eradicating women's ritual traditions by the new in-coming patriarchy? Snakes were sacred and so, for the new regime of light, dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

But back to Eurydice; she is a woman for whom transformation – or metamorphosis, as Ovid writes – is a focal point of her story. Metamorphosis is, likewise, at the centre of the experience of seizures. The Pythia of Delphi was a high priestess, an oracle and etymologically and symbolically related to python (slain by Apollo). Once again, a long-established site for women's culture to be carried out is destroyed by one of the new gods, Apollo.

My underworld is rimmed with a purple horizon.<sup>2</sup> The kind of purple you find at the edge of a black hole. Nothingness at its centre. Will I emerge from this state of unconsciousness or continue into a place beyond death? The purple horizon I refer to here is a metaphor arising out of emergence from a seizure, an afterprint on the mind, a visual echo, much like the echo experienced by Eurydice as she falls back into the underworld cleft when abandoned by Orpheus who ignores the consequences and assumes more importance to his need.

Much of my poetry is concerned with the intersection between myth, physics and my experiences of epileptic seizures. It takes me out of myself; it takes me to myself. It is a political and personal search, and it is poetry that makes this possible. I first began this exploration with my novel, *The Falling Woman* (2004), which was written between 1982 and 1992. I was part of an informal international movement of feminists writing about disability at a time when it was not an area mainstream publishers saw as having any market, and so such books were rarely published. In that book I compared the experience of a seizure with the movement of mountains.

Outside, time passed. Hours passed and she lay there, stirring to neither sound nor light. Then her hand moved, a mountain heaving up through the earth's crust.  
(Hawthorne 1992/2004: 166)

The sense of dislocation following a seizure is intense. The recovery can vary from half an hour to several days. It is unpredictable, as comes through in the following poem.

### night of the soul

sliding to oblivion  
fall crashlanding in the shower  
shocking to the wakened brain

light dark nothingness  
synapses loosened direction awry  
bicycle spreadeagled on the path

how many times can the sinkhole open  
seated on the navel of the world  
breathing laurel fumes

this chasm occupied by Pythia  
oracular prophesy a black ram  
a seizure for the gods

an abyss silent dark  
dredging the psyche lifting  
to the startling light

Once again, the Pythia appears. She has wrestled with me for four decades. Mythic tropes hold you in their grasp. She is the snake in the research undertaken by Marija Gimbutas (1989), and appears in the final chapter of *The Falling Woman* where she wraps her long body around the arms of Estelle, like a Cretan arm bracelet.

Poetry and fiction have enabled me to explore these experiences which are beyond everyday existence where most events have some predictability. It has also been a source of creativity, allowing me to represent an occurrence that can range from invisible to spectacularly and flamboyantly visible. Physics has given me the words that enable me to express this otherworldly experience.

### Acknowledgement

The poem Eurydice was first published in Susan Hawthorne 1993, 'The language in my tongue', *Four New Poets*, Melbourne: Penguin Books, p. 153

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more on the prehistory of snakes and women see Marija Gimbutas 1989: 121–37

<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'purple horizon' references Susan Hawthorne's poem 'purple horizon', published in *S/HE: An International Journal of Goddess Studies* 2.1 2023: 5-7

### Works cited

Gimbutas, Marija 1989 *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, San Francisco: Harper & Row

Hawthorne, Susan 1992/2004 *The Falling Woman*, Melbourne: Spinifex Press, p. 166.

Ovid 1955 [8CE] *Metamorphoses* 10.1–39 (trans Mary Innes), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 225.

---

### About the author

Susan Hawthorne is the author of ten collections of poetry, most recently *The Sacking of the Muses* (2019). She has published in journals and anthologies across the world, and her poetry has been translated into Hungarian, Spanish, German, Tamil among other languages. She has had international residencies in Chennai, Rome and Bursa.

<https://www.spinifexpress.com.au/susanhawthorne>

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/bjfmmtabco

**Keywords:** film, rabbits, myxomatosis,  
intra-actions, memorialisation

# CARRYING RABBIT WITH

‘12 Days of Myxoma’

Andraya Stapp-Gaunt

*University of Canberra*, ORCID: 0000-0002-9105-2521

## **Abstract**

My writing research poses and responds to questions of how and why we might make stories about living and dying well with rabbits. I use Indigenous epistemology and elements of Donna Haraway’s SF figure (2016) to create stories grounded in relatedness for partial healing. These stories perform the Māori *kawe mate*, a rite that translates as ‘carrying the dead’. Stories are inherited and reconfigured. They are made with others, including the dead. I think with the rabbits of Bowen Bridge, and their progenitors. I carry their memory through visual images and spoken word.



## CARRYING RABBIT WITH: '12 DAYS OF MYXOMA'

*Andraya Stapp-Gaunt*

At the moment an individual dies, its activity is incomplete. One could say that it will remain incomplete for as long as individual beings survive that are capable of re-actualizing this active absence, this seed of consciousness and of action. The responsibility of maintaining dead individuals in being through a perpetual *vékula* [*nékuia*] (the evocation rites of the dead) depends on living individuals. (Simondon, in Despret 2021: 3)

In early 2022, I learnt of the plight of hundreds of rabbits near Bowen Bridge, Hobart, via social media rabbit communities. The wild rabbits were dying due to the alleged illegal release of an anthropogenic virus, and reports from people on the ground suggested it was myxoma virus. Myxomatosis causes a painful and long-drawn-out death; this assures a greater chance of transmission by arthropods. The authorities were uninterested in helping the rabbits. The social media posts from local people reiterated the cruelty of the situation. It became apparent that the rabbits were invisible. As my writing research is anchored in rabbit-human relatedness, I felt compelled to acknowledge the individual rabbits that suffered for weeks and died at Bowen Bridge.

I live with five rabbits, so flying to Hobart posed a potential risk to my own rabbit companions. In league with COVID-19, which had become-with my body (as well as the other protists and bacteria that make me whole), I wrote the poem '12 Days of Myxoma' as an example of 'Grief at a distance' (Brooks-Pribac 2016).

'Grief at a distance' is an empathetic response to the plight of unknown nonhuman animals through personal experiences of witnessing nonhuman animal torture and suffering. This kind of empathy is associated with trauma, and I conceive of living and writing from this place as a form of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016).

In September of 2022, I flew down to Tasmania with my husband. Across three days, we viscerally attended to the multispecies entanglement at Bowen Bridge, and spent time with the bodies of the deceased rabbits who were strewn across paddocks. We sat quietly near empty burrows listening to ghosts, and then we filmed the rabbits in ways that we conceived of as being respectful. Through using visual images, we reconfigured a print poem into a **memorial film project** ([click link to view](#)) Much of the footage was filmed close to the ground to evoke the gaze of the rabbit.

Visceral attendance is work of the 'spirit, heart, head and hands' (Yunkaporta 2019: 274). It engenders a relational way of making creative outputs and is a far cry from solipsistic anthropocentric self-telling and self-making. During the process, I strived to connect to Country by attending to questions drawn from Yunkaporta's 'Protocols of relatedness'. These questions establish the relationship between two entities: 'Who are you? Where are you from? Where are you going? . . . Where does the knowledge you carry come from, and who shared it with you?' (Yunkaporta 2019: 169).

My own knowledge is anchored in Indigenous and Western knowledge traditions. I generate creative materials using an intersection of Indigenous epistemology (Yunkaporta 2019) and feminist multispecies theory from Haraway's 'SF figure' (2016). As part of my creative practice,



Three screengrabs from '12 Days of Myxoma'

I visually map entities in connection. I cannot generate new works without first picturing myself as in an interdependent relationship with other entities. The tension and balance between entities becomes a figure to think with and to create with.

'SF' stands for 'science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far' (Haraway 2016: 2). String figures – another SF – represents the entanglements of sympoietic entities that are woven, knotted, torn, and cut through processes of living and dying together on the planet. I interpret Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' to mean attending viscerally to humans and rabbits as sympoietic entities, and as a form of playing cat's cradle (string figures) 'where creative uncertainty' over 'mechanical confidence' matters (Stengers, in Haraway 2016: 34).

Creative uncertainty requires a sense of trust. The back-and-forth exchange of string patterns between two players comes with an acceptance that some stitches may be dropped, and new patterns emerge. This is how I view my relationship with my companion rabbits who are intrinsically connected to me – who are in my web of relations – who are kin. We are different species, but within that difference there are possibilities for our becoming-with, through my close attendance to our intra-actions, acknowledgement of my use of subjective accounts, and my ethic to unthink human exceptionalism.

Attending closely to our intra-actions includes attending to death. In the relationships between companion species who inhabit different lifespans, living and dying well calls for acts of responsibility (Haraway 2016). As a Māori-Dutch woman, I extend the Māori funerary ritual *kawe mate*, which translates as 'carry the dead', as an artistic and material expression of mourning and memorialising deceased rabbits. This ritual includes place-based, oral, visual, and print storytelling. These practices aim towards partial recuperation through the responsible action of carrying the memory of the dead on. Haraway writes:

Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing. Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think. (Haraway 2016: 39)

Like the Wolf Woman La Loba, who – as recorded by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (2008) – weaves the bones of the deceased animals together in her cave, I strive to sing the metaphorical rabbit bones to life, to 'maintain them in being', through spoken word poetry and visual image. One result is the film '12 Days of Myxoma', which focuses on the landscape near the bridge, and the rabbits who inhabit it in various guises. I encourage you to view the film, and so doing, join me in carrying the memory of the rabbits of Bowen Bridge. Brooks Pribac reiterates the role of the memorialisation as an act of connection and community:

... the vigils and other forms of open mourning validate the lives of the mourned animals as well as the lives of their conspecifics who continue to suffer and die under the violent pretense of normality. Simultaneously, they validate the mourners themselves, who have found the strength to expose their vulnerability in a world where the latter is also regulated by socially determined modes and levels of affordability. (2016: 5137)

By acknowledging the lives of the deceased rabbits, we acknowledge rabbits as individuals. By mourning them, we acknowledge the legitimacy of our grief and its vulnerability.

### Works cited

Brooks Pribac, T 2016 Grieving at a distance, in M DeMello (ed), *Mourning animals: Rituals and Practices Surrounding Animal Death*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press

Despret, V 2021 *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Haraway, D 2016 *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham: Duke University Press

Pinkola Estes, C 2008 *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman*, London: Rider

Yunkaporta, T 2019 *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking can Save the World*, Melbourne: Text Publishing

---

### About the author

Andraya is a Māori-Dutch woman, secondary English teacher, and PhD candidate at the Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra. Her writing is a thought experiment in 'making stories' with rabbits using feminist multispecies theory (Haraway 2016) and Indigenous epistemology (Yunkaporta 2019). Through processes of 'becoming-with' and 'making-with' rabbits, Andraya strives to foreground the role of human and nonhuman connectedness in processes of creativity. Andraya lives with five companion house rabbits who are her kin. She is writing a novel (with rabbits) called *Rabbit Island*.

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/vxzmirsxxj  
**Keywords:** lyric poetry and embodiment,  
re-imagining subjectivity, breath and  
signification, liminality

# POETRY AND BREATHING

## Beyond Subject and Object

Rose Lucas

*Victoria University*, ORCID: 0000-0003-2068-318x

### **Abstract**

This paper will consider the ways in which the poetic form echoes a visceral experience of embodiment that re-imagines the relationship between subject and object. Through a focus on poetic elements such as the rise and flow of line, the vital pauses of punctuation and white space together with the slip of association and metaphoricity, this paper contends that the lyric poem in particular not only recreates the experience of the respiring body but offers us an inhabited insight into an interplay of inside and outside, self and other, what sustains and what speaks. In this way, both poetry and breath can be seen to provide a deconstructed paradigm for subjectivity – a subjectivity that emerges from the flow of overlap and connectedness rather than differentiation. In this sense, the poem speaks the body as well as the body speaking the poem. Informed by a conceptual framework that includes Thích Nhất Hạnh's concept of 'interbeing' as well as Levinas' notion of the face as it meets the breathing face of the other, this discussion references the work of eco-poet Anne Elvey in addition to my own poetry project, 'Remarkable as Breathing.'



## POETRY AND BREATHING: BEYOND SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Rose Lucas

The one who bows and the one who is bowed to are both, by nature, empty  
– and therefore the communication between them is inexpressibly perfect

— Thích Nhất Hạnh<sup>1</sup>

This paper considers the ways in which poetic form both reflects and inhabits a visceral experience of embodiment. Through a focus on poetic elements such as the rise and flow of line, the vital pauses of punctuation and white space, together with the non-determinative nature of association and metaphoricity, the lyric poem in particular not only recreates the experience of the respiring body but also offers us an insight into its relation to notions of subject position. As an interplay of inside and outside, self and other, what sustains and what speaks, both poetry and breath provide what I argue is an enlivened paradigm for subjectivity – a subjectivity that emerges from the flow of overlap and connectedness rather than from discrimination and differentiation. In this sense, the poem speaks the body as well as the body speaking the poem, making space for the rich fields of silence as well as for the soundings, the definitions of language.

By prising open binaries such as self and other, inside and outside, silence and word, breath and text, this paper contends that poetic language is in fact a kind of deconstructive activity<sup>2</sup> – challenging us to recognise the habitual persistence of binary and hierarchised understandings of self and world while also, by means of its techniques of destabilisation, suggesting broader ways of understanding self and the possibilities of dialogue. The semantic textual markers of poetry elicit spaces of apparent ‘silence’ which can in turn be aligned with the visceral experience of the body – the various capacities of the respiring organism to ‘know,’ experience, and communicate. In other words, poetic language foregrounds an extra-textual surfeit that functions not as gap or as binarised negative (what has been omitted, what was never said) but rather as a space of potentially generative resonance and reflection, pulse and respiration. In indicating what it *is* possible to say through the relatively defined language of mark and form, poetic language also gestures towards kinds of perception which might be described as being in excess of a purely textual, rational mode of articulation.

As readers of the poem, we always operate in a space of paradox: we are alerted to the subliminal and sometimes insistent pressure of apparently non-transcribable spaces through the specificity of what is present and transcribed. Thus, while responding to the meaning-making capacity of the poetic text, we are also inevitably impacted by that which cannot be entirely semantically corralled within that framework. The metaphor, for instance, responded to both conceptually and viscerally, allows us to see the possibilities of correspondences, where certain ‘things’ or images are understood across a continuum of usually implicit comparison and differentiation – where they might be like or not like or be overlapping with other things in a variety of ways. Within this dance of correspondence and resonance, the canvas of understanding becomes larger, richer – even while this comparability of one thing with another will necessarily also bring with it the slipperiness of gap and recognition of approximation and limit. While this linguistic and semantic slipperiness between so-called articulated and non-articulated may operate to some extent across all modalities of language, I argue that this

slipperiness of meaning and possibility is particularly apparent in the kind of language we refer to as 'poetic'. Rather than seeking, somewhat hubristically, to incorporate everything within the sphere of articulation, poetry tends to play, often quite explicitly, within a space of evocation, delighting in a dance of light and shadow, talk and silence, breath and air. Poetic language is not therefore a marshaller of meaning in the way that prose might attempt to be; rather it functions to allude and to enable an immersive response closely aligned with the imagination and the unconscious of both poet and reader.

Any enquiry into the nature of poetic language also highlights the question of the ontological status of the text: where indeed can the poem be understood to exist? One highly recognisable form of the poem functions most overtly as words on a page, as a dynamic of rational semantics and linguistic evocation. Like all examples of genre texts, the individual poem derives its accretion of possible meanings from its comparative relationship to other poems, other texts which technologies of writing or printing have translated onto a page for reading; the poem thus operates primarily in this dizzying relation to other poems, to wisps of other ideas transliterated into the specificity of word and form. However, as discussed, by functioning within a space of the associative, the always-more, the poem also takes us to the sphere of the extra-rational, of what is beyond or perhaps signalled by the structures of the purely textual – spheres which themselves accrue certain labels of definition, such as the emotional, even the extra-self multi-connective intimations that in some contexts might be referred to as 'spiritual'. The poem and its meaning/s can also be identified within the corporeal and interpretative movements between the voice that reads – with the variable mechanisms of pause and tone, the textual manifestations of breath and pulse – and the context and apparatus of reciprocal acts of listening. Poetic language intentionally crosses a variety of fields of signification – the visual, the textual, the auditory, the physical and the sensory – gathering modes of communication and interpretation as it goes. The explicit utilisation of such a range of significations and their respective semantic features creates a cross-hatching of mark and space, sound and silence, speaking and listening – a fabric-making that fundamentally highlights interstice as well as sign. Straddling this space between, the articulated poem shifts and re-forms as it is breathed out into the worlds of text and listening.

In its liminality, in its graphic encounters between text and page, pause and articulation, the poem thus embodies and initiates a movement that destabilises binarised categories, challenging us to move beyond fixed and closed notions of the self. Instead, voice, sense and identification are unleashed from a lockstep of rationality, creating flow between inside and outside, across a point of seeing and a field of vision, through the air that surrounds us and becomes part of us and the breath that we bring back into that world. Zen teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh has described this experience or recognition of a reciprocal flow that breaks down binarized categories as a profound one of 'interbeing':

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. (Thích Nhất Hạnh 1992: 6)

As Nhất Hạnh implies, this act of an ever deepening seeing, of a close perceptual recognition of particularity and of flow is a fundamentally poetic one – where 'poetic' is understood as an expressive and communicative mode that foregrounds and celebrates the interstice. In

other words, whatever its particular style – lyric, narrative, slam – poetic language enables us both to recognise and to viscerally express an ethos and a way of being which is characterised by fabric and network. Nh̃t H̃nh’s notion of interbeing, which I argue describes an implicit element of all poetic language, refers not just to interaction between discrete subjectivities or points of opposition, but rather points to a quite different understanding of connectedness and interconnectedness. Within this paradigm, various nodes of intensity or specificity – say, you and me, the poem and the world, the eye and the flower – are in dynamic and synaptic interrelationship. In such a hum of connectivity, we are filaments in the same network, sparking and touching and moving through and into and with each other’s charged fields of potential signification.

The relation between the mechanism of the breath – so central to the functioning of the creaturely organism as well as to contemplative practice – is often graphically encoded within the techniques of lyric poetry. As in my poem, ‘Poetry and breathing’ from *This Shuttered Eye* (2021: 28), the line and space, enjambment and caesura, the scattering of words across the canvas of the page, all suggest an interplay of word and white space, highlighting the close relationship between body and voice, the nodal points of so-called self and world:

Pared back to the clarity  
of line flowing into  
line maybe

every poem is  
about breathing  
about re-inscribing

the certainty  
for now at least  
of rise

and fall  
an anchor  
in wild waters and calm

the almost unbearable simplicity of  
in  
and  
out

the cool air I invite into the habitation of my body  
its invisible conduits

the welcome tide of bright blood and spark  
of neuron

that searches me out  
washing me in the salty pathways of life

the warmed breath that flows from me and  
back into the world

I am its creature  
a body swimming in channels of air

the steady and the variable beating of  
words and white spaces

pulsing an interplay of  
note  
and rest

ornament and pause while always  
the deep thrum of silence

its potential to disrupt to splinter

the sheen of surface

The spaces of breathing are here literally inscribed within the textual body of the poem – offering pause and contemplation, allowing the body to ‘speak’ in a way that informs an accretion of different kinds of meaning through and beyond the parameters of the textual. By enacting these connections between the intention of a poem and its modes of articulation and communication, ‘Poetry and breathing’ suggests that this might be how *all* poems might be imagined and shaped – and, in counterpoint, that the subject matter of all poetry is on some level always informed by the awareness of the respiring body that gives rise to it. Here, in this semantic landscape in which body is in metaphoric correspondence with both word and world, ‘silence’ is a ‘deep thrum’ reverberating within the precarity of a ribcage – a non-linguistic sound that underpins and informs a ‘sheen of surface,’ glinting and shifting in sunlight. Like the breathing body, silence is the rich awareness that feeds an ephemera of specificity, the chiaroscuro of what comes and goes, rises and subsides.

In Anne Elvey’s ‘The return of air’, from her collection *On Arrivals of Breath* (2019: 86), breath is linked with an ebullient nebulosity of spirit as might be expressed in the ecstatic and emphasised couplet of ‘singing/singing.’ The poet’s voice – textual, embedded in the physicality of the body – is carried here on undulating rivers of breath, becoming something we might refer to as ‘praise’ just as well as ‘lament,’ the sound of ‘angels’ as well as the sensuousness of ‘brush of skin’. In addition environment of the air, which is transformed into breath by the apparatus of a human body, becomes human voice – a sound that in turn reaches back into air and toward the decoding and interpreting ears of the receptive listener. The spacing of lines and contrasting justifications in this poem invites us both to pause and to respond to the beats of music, a kind of hypnotic and ritualistic call and response that opens corridors of exchange between invoker and what might be invoked:

did I forget  
that call

singing  
singing

o  
generous

o  
air

bare weight  
on flesh

o

singing  
singing

(Elvey 2019: 86, lines 34–46)

In her most recent collection *Leaf* (2022), Elvey continues this exploration of a dynamic inter-relationship between a world of growing things (sometimes referred to as the natural world) and the viscerally inhabited interior world of the poet who exists among and alongside it (the apparent 'self' that observes and inhabits it). Elvey is here enacting a fundamentally decolonising voice, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) has described it, as she eschews the oppositions of looker and looked at, with all the imperial connotations of power that have been aligned with the gaze of the subject. In this sense, Elvey's paradigm-shifting work challenges us to reconsider implications of the binary across a number of interlocking spheres: the opposition between so-called human and nature; between coloniser and colonised; between body and mind; between perceiver and what is perceived. In the title poem, she writes:

you touch from inside's  
other vein and skin  
silver  
to a spot of rust smooth

to the swell of an insect's  
egg held in fingers  
breath  
becomes a word

(Elvey 2022: 3)

Through its techniques of image, enjambment and the surprise of juxtaposition, the poem takes us into a dynamic perceptual field. 'Inside's other' remains in intimate physical and lexical exchange with 'inside', in the same way that the 'vein and skin' of arm and leaf are experienced as interchangeable. The world of the leaf is not envisaged as emblematic of an external nature in contradistinction to the human realm of consciousness; rather the image of the poem draws them into what could be described as a visualised interbeing, where finally 'breath/becomes word'. In both the books of Genesis and the Gospel of John – seminal texts within western

ontological constructions of creator/human, self/language/world – the nebulosity of the divine is channelled into the specificity of bodily creation and the defined and signifying ‘word’.<sup>3</sup> Elvey’s poetics, however, while acknowledging the influence of Christian traditions across her extensive scholarly and poetic oeuvre,<sup>4</sup> suggest a far more fluid and multidirectional mode of transubstantiation, challenging the hierarchical and linear temporality of the Judaeo-Christian model.

In her important poem ‘How is it you interpret things?’ (2022: 15), Elvey extends this imagery of a fluid exchange between an apparent inside and outside to the abstract level of meaning-making and ontology. If we do in fact inhabit a continuum of breath and air, leaf and body, by what process – and from what position – might we make interpretative sense of such an experience? Using the second person address across enjambed couplets, this poem becomes a corporealised canvas of exploration as it probes this question, always allowing the movement of air and ‘thing’ to flow through it:

You work with density and form  
speak tassle shift still

You curtain light dapple  
drift make gentle other

move and hold back motion  
You press persistent to snap

tangle to display how  
fragile a thing to unsettle

wisp unhinge a limb  
You advance You wait seen

in your reading of mass and ply  
Against the bend and the pull

of a solid you ebb you flow  
like a liquid handling a thing

In this poem, Elvey uses the ‘you’ to stand in for an emerging point of awareness and reflection. Grammatically distanced from the hegemony of ‘I/me’ – the self of identification – ‘you’ offers a fluidity and flexibility to allude to a ‘solid’ that nevertheless must ‘bend and pull,’ while ‘you flow/like a liquid/handling a thing’.

The relationship between body and body, voice and voice is made explicit in the coming together of human faces – be that in acts of intimacy, listening or conversation. To be ‘facing,’ in this sense, is to encounter at least the possibility of inter-facing, a primal scene of exchange whatever the context. My poem ‘Zen monastic teaches on zoom,’<sup>5</sup> is a lockdown-era meditation not only on the surprising intimacy possible via digital technologies but also on the ethical relationship implicit in the bare and pared-back relation between one face fully aware of and present before another. In such an interaction, an experience of self (embodied/disembodied) is literally confronted with immediacy of an apparent other, and thus the prospect of recognition



and exchange. In evoking the somewhat surprising context of the zoom space, the poem asks us to inhabit this movement from self/other and into the flow of 'we'. When referring to the human face, both literally and metaphorically, Emmanuel Lévinas describes it as an 'order[ing] and ordain[ing]' of that which we call the self, thereby calling the speaking subject into a fundamental reciprocity of 'giving and serving' the Other (in Marcus 2010: 16). Such a notion of what might be called the sacrosanct – perhaps defined as that particularised thing/text/experience that provokes an experience of insight and connectivity – is, he implies, a recognition of the lived reality of the destabilising inextricability of subject and object. The 'face' – seen in unexpected immediacy via the technologies of the zoom gallery, the magnification of speaker view – reveals the umbilical tendrils of connection that make ethical relations between different kinds of 'faces' not only acts of obligation but importantly, embodiments of mutuality or interbeing. In the undulations and flux of this relationship of inhabiting the same (virtual) space of breathing, looking, listening, speaking – faces come together in both words and senses, and previous distinctions are rendered permeable:

The shape of your head –  
as you lean in towards us  
adjusting your microphone its white cords  
hanging like jewellery against your brown monastic robe  
your glance flicking to keyboard controls

is sculptural exposed  
a light down of persistent hair  
travels across the territory of your closely  
shaven crown and  
your eyes catch the light nervously

no expectations and  
find ours through the eye of a camera  
and each one of us looks back  
singly together  
we are washed in the generosity of this looking

this cleared space you have made  
with the intimate gift of your face its kindness  
presence distilled  
in a screen you find your way  
into our rooms into our hearts and

in return we bring our own faces  
illuminated with attention and the openness  
of palms fingers ready to  
listen  
to the modulations of voice

to the shapes of words and ideas  
and longing

to travel the gentle currents of what is said  
 and felt and imagined  
 face to face breathing

To foreground the primacy of breath within the language and structure of poetry is of course also to draw attention to the very question of impermanence – that as cloud changes into rain that changes into tree and thus into paper, so too will the mechanism of the body and breath reach a point of limitation and transformation. This space of cessation – call it mortality or perhaps silence's deep well – is also mirrored within the respiratory lacunae of the poem, as this poem 'Year of breath, December 31, 2020' (Lucas 2022: 32), suggests:

All this long year  
     its cramps of anxiety  
     its rolling replications and blows of  
 grief the exposed pulse at the temple or  
  
 the building of its quiet routines while  
 we all stayed home and step  
 by stumbling step found different  
 ways to think about our lives  
  
 all this strange year the battered world  
 has kept on breathing even  
 as we see writ large  
 the fragility  
  
     the sometime-ness  
 of this respiring machine the always risk of  
 catch choke of tightness  
 the certain knowledge  
  
 that the small currents  
 of this one body will one day  
     falte breath hole empty  
 washed away in other widening tides

The poem, and the act of poetry itself, enact the fecund exchanges of world and being, the voice that speaks from the tree of the corporeal into and with the organic collectivity of the forest. The poem will thus always in some manner echo the rising and falling of the respiring body; the shapes of its lines and stanzas, the eddying of images and ideas within the form of the poem will continue to speak both about and as the body that produces them. When we hear the rhythms of poetry – regular or unpredictable, its melding voice and integral threads of silence – we hear the possibilities for a different kind of being in the world, a circulation based on the recognition of a momentary breathing inside, between and around the experiential concentration of bodies.

With its emphases on metaphor, evocation, white space on the page, poetic language becomes an important strategy for rethinking models of a dominant subject position (and the

concomitant objectification of other, or world). To return to the Zen concept of ‘emptiness’ with which this paper began, we find there another paradigm shift to challenge the dichotomy of plenitude and negation, of self and other. In the scenario described in the epigraph, taken from Thích Nhất Hạnh’s ‘Touching the earth,’ ‘the one who bows and the one who is bowed to are both, by nature, empty – and therefore the communication between them is inexpressibly perfect’. In this sense, to be ‘empty’ is not to be devoid, or self-abased in any way. Rather, it is to decentre the idea of the self from the fantasy of a kind of pre-Copernican centrality; that is, a singular self does not function as the origin and production of meaning. Instead, should each ‘face’, however defined, be able to acknowledge the other – here represented in the mutuality of the reverential deep bow – then, according to Nhất Hạnh, it is both a corporeal and a metaphorical manifestation of a sharing and exchange based on flow, deep listening and a recognition of what links, of being threads in the same complex weave. To be ‘empty’ in this sense of not assuming an *a priori* imperial selfness is thus actually to be open, welcoming of the plenitudes of silence and the lived experiences of the body – and thus paradoxically more able to participate in the rich wash of communication. Poetic language has the capacity to elicit a similar exchange where the nodal points of observation, experience and articulation are in a state of flow, and where sparks and flickers of meaning are evoked and suggested through interconnections of word and space, speaking and listening, through the temporal and inhabited tides of air and breathing.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to my friend and poetry colleague Anne Elvey for permission to quote from her wonderful poetry in this discussion.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> From Thích Nhất Hạnh 2023. ‘Emptiness’ is here understood in the Buddhist sense of not having a separate identity or defined ‘self’. Once we accept that illusory nature of ‘self’, then the possibilities of a fluid ‘perfect communication’ between our interconnecting momentary points of awareness becomes possible.

<sup>2</sup> I am of course referencing here proponents of poststructuralist/deconstructive analyses of the unstable relationship between language and meaning, such as Jacques Derrida (1977) and Jean-François Lyotard (1984).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, Verses 1 and 26 (in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible), read ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion. The Gospel of John, Verse 1, in the same version, reads ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’

<sup>4</sup> cf. Elvey, *On Arrivals of Breath* (2019), and scholarly works such as *The Matter of the Text* (2011) and *Reading the Magnificat in Australia* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Rose Lucas, Zen monastic teaches on zoom, *Remarkable as Breathing: Poetry of Contemplation*, forthcoming Liquid Amber Press, 2024. This poem is dedicated to Thay Phap Hai.

### Works cited

- Derrida, Jacques 1977 *Of Grammatology* (trans Gayatri Spivak), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Elvey, Anne 2011 *The Matter of the Text: Material Engagements between Luke and the Five Senses*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press
- Elvey, Anne 2019 *On Arrivals of Breath: Poems and Prayers*, Montrose Vic.: Poetica Christi Press
- Elvey, Anne 2020 *Reading the Magnificat in Australia: Unsettling Engagements*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press
- Elvey, Anne 2022 *Leaf*, Seddon, Vic: Liquid Amber Press
- Lucas, Rose 2021 Poetry and breathing, *This Shattered Eye*, Seddon, Vic: Liquid Amber Press, p.28
- Lucas, Rose 2022 Year of breath, *Increments of the Everyday*, Newcastle: Puncher and Wattman
- Liotard, Jean-François 1984 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans G Bennington, B Massumi & F Jameson), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Marcus, Paul 2010 *In Search of the Good Life: Emmanuel Levinas, Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living*, London: Karnac Books
- Thích Nhất Hạnh 1992 *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, New York: Bantam
- Thích Nhất Hạnh 2023 Touching the earth, *Chanting from the Heart 2*, Berkeley: Parallax Press
- Tuhiwai Smith, Linda 2013 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Zed Books
- 

### About the author

Dr Rose Lucas is a poet and living and working on unceded Wurundjeri Country in Naarm, and an academic at Victoria University. She is the author of four poetry collections (the most recent being *Increments of the Everyday*, Puncher and Wattmann 2022); her next collection, *Remarkable as Breathing*, is forthcoming 2024. She is also founding Publisher and Editor at Liquid Amber Poetry Press.

---

# THE BLUE HILLS ARCHIPELAGO

## Longform poetics & the ecological anti-epic

Jake Goetz

Western Sydney University, ORCID: 0000-0001-5901-3904

### Abstract

This essay puts forth Laurie Duggan's decades-long serial poem, *Blue Hills* (1980–), as a radical anti-mythic and ecological approach to longform 'epic' poetics – or what I term the 'ecological anti-epic'. The essay first reflects on the mythic ambitions of twentieth century Anglo-American modernist epic poets, such as Ezra Pound and TS Eliot, before turning to what I call the North American 'anti-epic' postmodernist serial poem tradition. Centring on Robert Duncan's *Passages* – a key influence on Duggan's own series – I argue this 'anti-epic' approach to the long poem replaced the 'mythical method' (Eliot 1923: 483) of early modernist epics with a compositional method. Reading *Blue Hills* through the guiding principle of Duncan's series, 'grand collage' (2014: 298), the essay then posits that *Blue Hills* – as a localised re-deployment of Duncan's grand collage method – can be read as both a continuation, and subversive settler Australian reimagination, of the North American anti-epic serial poem tradition. Drawing on Peter Minter's archipelagic approach to reading Australian poetry, *Blue Hills* is then read as a type of archipelago of poetic islands, one which challenges not only the epic-cum-mythic ambitions of modernist longform poetry, but also the racially charged environmental myth-conceptions of early settler Australian poetic movements, such as the Jindyworobaks. I conclude with a brief reflection on the links between the process-based aesthetics of post-modern anti-epics and what Connor Weightman calls the 'ecological long poem' (2020: 3), ultimately positing that Duggan's *Blue Hills* refutes the modernist penchant for speaking declaratively about the world and instead affects a sense that the world is reveling in its own wording.

## THE *BLUE HILLS* ARCHIPELAGO: LONGFORM POETICS & THE ECOLOGICAL ANTI-EPIC

Jake Goetz

### 1. Introduction

Begun in 1980, Australian poet Laurie Duggan's serial poem *Blue Hills* has been in the process of composition for 43 years (as of 2023), making it the longest intentionally continuous poetry project in settler Australian history. The first 75 poems of the series were written over a 26-year period – until Duggan moved to the UK in 2006 – and were subsequently published by Puncher & Wattmann as *The Collected Blue Hills* (2012), for which the book was awarded the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry. Until now, criticism of *Blue Hills* has centred on this collection. Upon Duggan's return to Australia at the end of 2018, however, the project again became *uncollected*, with 35 new *Blue Hills* poems published in *Homer Street* (Giramondo 2020).

In this essay, I propose *Blue Hills* as an anti-epic approach to longform poetics, one which seeks a subversively anti-mythic *and* ecological approach to writing 'Australia'. To do this, I first reflect on 20th-century Anglo-American modernist poets who used the epic genre in a mythopoetic attempt to create 'totalising works of culture' (Weightman 2020: 3). I then turn to what I call the North American 'anti-epic' post-modernist serial poem tradition and argue that poets used this form to reject the mytho-epic project of their modernist forebears. To assist me in this argument, I centre on one example of these North American anti-epic serial poems, Robert Duncan's *Passages*,<sup>1</sup> which Duggan himself notes was an influence for his own serial poem (2012: 6). Reading *Blue Hills* through the guiding principle of Duncan's series, 'grand collage' (Duncan 2014: 298), I posit that *Blue Hills* – as a localised re-deployment of Duncan's grand collage method – is both a continuation, and subversive settler Australian reimagination, of the North American anti-epic serial poem tradition.

Given *Blue Hills* differs from other US postmodernist serial poems in its explicit engagement with Australian localities and their accompanying histories, this essay also interrogates whether Duggan's anti-epic approach to writing Australia can nevertheless be read as yet another settler attempt to re-compose or re-mythologise First Nations lands according to the poet's own Western conception of ecological space (no matter how 'anti-epic' it is). To further argue that the series does refute the mythic tendencies of Anglo-American modernist epics through its composition, thematics, and overall aesthetic, I draw on Peter Minter's archipelagic approach to reading Australian poetry. Through this archipelagic lens, I elucidate how the work is all 'about keeping things local, as nodes in constantly evolving networks, rather than trying to universalise a totalising idea' not only about 'Australian poetry' (as per Minter's conceptualisation) but Australia at large (Minter 2013: 160–61). In doing so, I also argue *Blue Hills* challenges the mytho-nationalist texts of early settler poetic movements, such as the Bush Balladeers and Jindyworobaks: a claim that speaks to Duggan's own admission that even before he 'left high-school' he 'had developed a mistrust of literature that paraded its Australianness' (Duggan 2006).

Lastly, tying together my interpretive 'grand collage' and 'archipelagic' analysis, I reflect on the links between the process-based aesthetics of post-modern anti-epics and what Connor Weightman calls the 'ecological long poem' (2020: 3), positing that *Blue Hills* refutes the



modernist epic's penchant for speaking declaratively about the world and instead affects a sense that the world is reveling in its own wording.

## 2. Thinking about 'Myth'

Before beginning my anti-mythic *as* anti-epic argument, it is useful to first define what exactly I mean by myth. In Roland Barthes's seminal text, *Mythologies*, the French semiologist posits that myths are predicated on a 'certain knowledge of reality' which is not at all 'an abstract, purified essence' but a 'formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function' (1973: 119). As a semiologist, Barthes critiques the topic through the field of semiotics: the interpretive study of how societies use 'signs', such as objects, ideas, and gestures, to communicate a specific meaning.

To exemplify his semiotic approach more concretely, it is elucidating to share a discussion from his text that critiques the cover of a French magazine, *Paris-Match*, upon which stands a young black man dressed in a French uniform performing a salute. For Barthes, the soldier is a 'signifier': he presents the 'meaning' of the image, while the 'colonialism ... Frenchness and militariness' he represents, i.e., the 'signified' part of the image, turns the soldier into a 'concept' which, he argues is the basis of myth (1973: 116). As he continues, although the 'meaning', the *actual* image in and of itself, is 'self-sufficient', containing a kind of 'knowledge, a past, a memory', the *concept* of the image turns it into an 'empty, parasitical form', one where 'history evaporates' (1973: 117). As Barthes ironically quips: 'one must put the biography of the Negro in parantheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified' (1973: 118). Pinpointing the fundamental character of the mythical concept in the appropriation of meaning, Barthes's analysis ultimately highlights the way myth transforms the soldier, as a 'rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, disputable image', into an accomplice of 'French Imperiality', the 'general History of France', and 'its colonial adventures ...' (1973: 118–19). In concluding his treatise on myth, Barthes argues that myths denote a type of 'depoliticised speech' (1973: 142). For mythologists like himself, it is in the logical counter to this, in the 'repoliticisation of speech', that one can find a way to speak back to this distorted vision of reality, which is 'constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things' (1973: 142).

This interpretation of myth as not only the obfuscation or obliteration of history, but the depoliticisation of speech, aligns with Wiradjuri poet and academic Jeanine Leane's more recent idea of the 'settler mythscape', which she describes as the 'stories' settler Australians invented and imported to establish the 'founding myth of nation' (2020). In her keynote lecture, 'Unwinding Australia: The politics of evasion post-Mabo' at the 2022 ASAL conference, Leane further explicated this idea by revisiting certain settler creative productions, such as Debra Choate's 1997 film, *The Castle*, and Trent Dalton's 2018 book, *Boy Swallows Universe*, which she asserts play a central role in the development and perpetuation of this 'mythscape'. Hinting at the crux of her mythopoetic argument, Leane draws these works into a lineage of creative outputs defined by 'the great Australian tradition of not telling the past' (Leane 2022). Centring her discussion on non-Indigenous Australian cultural productions, we can come upon a more localised understanding of the central function of myth. That is, it denotes not only the creative evasion of a true recounting of settler Australia's history, but that history's continual obfuscation through whitewashed narratives that centre on only further building up settler Australia's self-mythologising edifice.

In line with the interpretations of myth above, this essay ultimately explores how Duggan's *Blue Hills* – thematically, compositionally, aesthetically – strives for an *anti-mythic* rendering of Australia: one that refuses to transform and distort the *meanings* of the places he passes through into fodder for the 'settler mythscape' narrative (2020).

### 3. To Epic or Anti-Epic: (Post)Modern Iterations of the Long Poem

In the early 20th century, Anglo-American modernist poets sought to capture the fragmented nature of the increasingly industrialised post-war societies in which they lived. One of the ways they sought to do this was by returning to the mythic potential of epic poetry. Some of the emblematic examples of modernist epics include TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922; written over three years), Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1925; written over 47 years between 1915 and 1962), William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (1946; written over 12 years), H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (1961; written over three years), and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* (1975; written over 22 years).

Unlike canonical examples of the classical epic, such as Homer's *The Odyssey* and *Iliad* or the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, these modernists didn't seek to write long heroic narratives to express a 'cosmic perspective and collective memory', one 'secured by superhuman or ancestral agents' (Nichols 2020: par. 3). Rather, like their Anglo-American Romantic poetry forebears, they sought to re-imagine the epic through a range of poetic techniques.

Though I lack the space to give a detailed account of the Romantic epic, I will briefly emphasise that the British Romantics were the first to transform the epic genre into one of not only lyricism but 'self-development': a way of fostering, as Johns-Putra notes, an 'everyday anti-epic heroism, a heroism of the self' (2006: 8). This British approach to the epic, however, differed from what was occurring across the Atlantic, where Walt Whitman sought to provide mythological sustenance to the new American republic through his visionary epic, *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Singing not only of himself but 'all men' (1855: 219), Whitman's work was not only significant for democratising Wordsworth's self-as-hero, but for the way he did this using plain-speech and free verse. As Johns-Putra notes, by trading 'epic narration' for 'prophetic psalmody', Whitman broke 'new world heroic poetry' from 'Old World epic tradition' (2006: 222), thus laying the 'epic' foundation for the aforementioned modernists, who would use 'collage and disjunction, free verse, an unsentimental impersonality, and a dense web of references to both high and low culture' to better capture the modern, urban environments in which they lived (Editors 2023).

Despite the modernist desire to re-invent epic poetry both formally and thematically, many modernist epics still retained key classical epic traits, such as a monumental length, a desire for structural cohesion, and varying degrees of heroism, didacticism, and nationalism, all of which were tied together by the aim of mythologising 'the increasing confusion, fragmentation, and slippages in perception that constitute the Modernist ethos' (Johns-Putra 2006: 8). As Lynn Keller notes, the modernists emphasised the 'communal project of epic – its narration of the audience's cultural, historic, or *mythic heritage*; its attempt to address an audience of citizens using the voice of the community (rather than the voice of a single sensibility); and its didactic aims' (Keller 1997: 8; emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

I italicise 'mythic heritage' in the above quote for the importance of myth to the epic ambitions of the modernists cannot be understated. As TS Eliot himself noted in his discussion of James

Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', myth was an essential objective for the modernists, as it provided:

a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history ... Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step towards making the modern world possible for art. (1923: 483)

Eliot's 'mythical method' highlights how modernist poets and writers sought to perpetuate that key epic principle of creating 'world-sized imaginaries' that might provide a comprehensive, albeit fragmented, portrait of the cultures and societies in which they lived (Nichols 2020: par. 1). As Johns-Putra also notes, modernists such as Eliot didn't simply write epics but invested in an 'interpretation of epic' 'firmly circumscribed by a mythic conception of a long-lost golden age' (2006: 8, 24), an approach they hoped would allow them to represent 'the spirit' of their own modern age (2006: 171). This claim is further substantiated by Ezra Pound – the modernist poet noted for his entanglement in the fascist movements of the early 20th century – who in speaking of the epic stated that it should be 'the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man' (Pound in Johns Putra 2006: 171): a way of imposing, as Johns-Putra further suggests, an 'order on the modern awareness of chaos' (2006: 171).<sup>3</sup>

Following the mythopoetic ambitions of these modernists, the postmodern serial poem emerged as what I call an 'anti-epic' and consequently 'anti-mythic' rebuff of these modernist epics. Prior to reading Duggan's *Blue Hills* as working out of this postmodernist anti-epic tradition, it is important to first reflect on the lineage of North American poets who pursued a more anti-epic approach to the long poem. Some key examples include Louis Zukofsky's *A* (1978; written over 46 years), George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1968), Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* (1982; written over one day), Robert Duncan's *Passages* (1987; written over 19 years), and Anne Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy* (2011; written over 25 years).

Though I am unable to conduct a comprehensive survey of the postmodernist anti-epic here, I argue that one of the key aspects of this approach to longform poetics was to transform the poem itself, that is, language and the process of composition, into the 'epic' subject. This process-based approach to the epic, I argue, refuted any conclusive or totalising way of writing about the world and, in doing so, acknowledged the difficulty of writing an 'epic' poem in a geo-historical context in which, as Nichols notes, 'many competing versions of the world' exist (Nichols 2020: par. 1). As Matthew Carbery further notes, the central theme for many post-modernist US poets working in the longform mode was the 'process of composition itself' (2019: 4).

To better understand the overtly anti-mythic aims of this process-based approach, it is illuminating to turn to the underlying ambitions of a foundational example of the anti-epic longform serial poem, Louis Zukofsky's *A*. Written over 46 years and across 800 pages, the poem series bounces the reader through the poet's everyday life, striving not for any form of mythic worldmaking, nor even the coherent communication of a central idea. As Charles Bernstein notes, *A* replaced the modernist tendency for the 'overwhelming monumentalism of "the" great poem' and instead emphasised the need 'for "a" series of poems' that would replace 'the major keys for minor chords, universals for particulars, the grandiose for discreteness' (Bernstein, in Zukofsky 2006: ii–xiv). In doing so, the poem presented an 'explicit turning away' from creating a poem in which all the parts cohere, as in Pound's *The Cantos*, and instead reveled in the

‘seeming randomness of history without an explanatory framework’ (Twitchell-Waas 2015: 3). Zukofsky’s anti-mythic ambitions are perhaps best summarised in his own words:

The poet wonders why so many today have raised up the word ‘myth’, finding the lack of so-called ‘myths’ in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from, as it were, having become too radioactive, when instead a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. (Zukofsky, in Altieri 1979: 11)

Ironically referencing his own two poems, *A* and *Poem Beginning ‘The’* (1927), Zukofsky hints toward an alternative approach to longform poetry that prioritises nothing less than language itself. Such an approach paved the way for longform poets to replace Eliot’s ‘mythical method’ with what we might call the compositional, or ‘anti-mythic’, method. It should also be said that Zukofsky’s language-centred approach to writing was greatly influenced by his own Objectivist motivations which critiqued, as Charles Altieri notes, the poet as ‘prophetic’ by deferring authorial intentions to ‘aesthetic objects in such a way that the conditions of desire are themselves dramatized and forced to take responsibility for their productions’ (Altieri 1979: 12). A line from Zukofsky’s 1931 essay, ‘Sincerity and Objectification’, elucidates this point: ‘Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody’ (1931: 273).

Rather than providing a detailed discussion of Zukofsky’s poem series here, I now want to turn to a poet we can think of as one of Zukofsky’s anti-epic descendants, Robert Duncan, and his own long serial poem, *Passages*. I’ve chosen this text to better explicate the anti-mythic potential of the process-based anti-epic because, above all else, it was Duncan’s serial poem innovations that influenced Duggan to begin writing his own serial poem, *Blue Hills* (2012: 6).

#### 4. *Passages: The Endless Nature of Grand Collage*

Robert Duncan’s *Passages* (1968–1987) was written over 19 years and, much like Duggan’s *Blue Hills*, intermittently published in a variety of poetry collections. Indeed, Duncan refuted the very idea of the poems ever being collected into one single cohesive collection (Quartermain 2014: xlili). The key aim of Duncan’s series was to poetically actualise his idea of ‘grand collage’ (Duncan 2014: 298), which he first used to describe his serial poem in the introduction to his collection, *Bending the Bow* (1968). More a poetic manifesto than a neat description of the poem’s intent, Duncan states the first of the *Passages* poems belongs to a series in which ‘the poems extend in an area larger than my work in them. I enter the poem as I entered my own life, moving between an initiation and a terminus I cannot name’ (2014: 296). Negating the idea of a ‘fixed’ beginning or end to his poem series, Duncan’s ‘grand collage’ was the poet’s attempt to find an expansive poetic form that might mirror how the ‘interconnectedness of things offers an infinite potentiality’: a way to trace a ‘reality-in-flux continually struggling toward form without being itself formless—and in which everything coexists’ (in Quartermain 2014: xxxv, xxxix). In that sense, ‘grand collage’ had little to do with modernist literary collage but was rather Duncan’s poetic embracing of the central premise of process philosophy: that ‘being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it’ (Seibt 2022).

Duncan's enthusiasm for process philosophy, and its influence on *Passages*, cannot be understated. As he noted after first reading *Process and Reality* (1929), a text written by the founder of process philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead: 'It sets up a craving in me ... for large spatial architectures at the edge of chaos. That the primordial is always 'ahead', beyond! My mind does not grasp it; mind is grasped by it' (in Quartermain 2014: xxxii). With this in mind, we can see how Duncan rejected, to quote Rachel Blau DuPlessis, a stance toward 'conclusions, endings, terminus, or any kind of closure' in *Passages*, thus allowing the 'ever-evolving' project to upset the way we define or understand long poems as epic (2020: par. 26).

To further draw out the unending anti-epic nature of 'grand collage', it is useful to turn to Rachel Blau DuPlessis's own analysis of Duncan's method. As DuPlessis states, Duncan didn't view it as applying a 'unified field theory' to poetry, nor as a 'theorizing practice that explains the known and unknown world by "one principle" fundamental to everything' (2020: par. 24) – traits that are discernible in the early longform modernist works mentioned previously. Rather, *The Passages*, as an example of 'grand collage', presented, in DuPlessis' words, an attempt to imagine one 'gigantic metonymic linkage of everything in continuous creation' (2020: par. 24) – 'the endless presentation of 'what is' on many scales' (2020: par. 24). Characterised by a 'mix of times, places', it is important to stress also that on the level of individual poems, the series acknowledged 'not the oneness of everything' but, in line with process philosophy, a principle of 'relatedness' (2020: par. 25). Take, for example, an excerpt from 'At the Loom: Passages 2' (Duncan 1987: 308):

my mind a shuttle among  
    set strings of the music  
lets a weft of dream grow in the day time,  
    an increment of associations,  
    luminous soft threads,  
the thrown glamour, crossing and recrossing,  
    the twisted sinews underlying the work.

Back of the images, the few cords that bind  
    meaning in the word-flow,  
    the rivering web  
    rises among wits and senses  
gathering the wool into its full cloth.

The secret! the secret! It's hid  
    in its showing forth.

Tracing an 'increment of associations, / luminous soft threads', the above excerpt explicitly takes the act of composition as its subject, highlighting Duncan's process-based prerogative not to detach a poem from its *poeming*; or rather, in line with Roland Barthes's interpretation of the function of myth, to not allow a poem's subject to be transformed into a mythical concept (Barthes 1973: 117). This can be seen in Duncan's acknowledgement that the 'secret' of the 'rivering web' of poetic creation lies simply in its 'showing forth'. This process-based approach

to writing, in which the dynamic nature of being is the primary focus (Seibt 2022), is further backed by Duncan's belief that 'We ourselves in our actuality, as the poem in its actuality, its thingness, are facts, factors, in which It makes Itself real' (2014: 298). Duncan's use of 'we' in the above quote, however, doesn't indicate a universal, homogenising notion of speaking for a collective – arguably one of the central ambitions of the modernist epics previously discussed – but rather speaks to Duncan's statement in the introduction to *Bending the Bow* (as it appears in *The Collected Later Poems & Plays*):

... the real 'we' is the company of the living, of all the forms Life Itself, the primal wave of it, writing itself out in evolution, proposes. Needs, as our poetry does, all the variety of what poets have projected poetry to be. 'They' can be differentiated into 'he' and 'she'. 'We' is made up of 'I's, pronounced 'eyes', as Zukofsky reminds us, and 'you', in whom the word 'thee' has been hidden away. (2014: 295)

Gesturing toward a vision of 'we' as 'I's, Duncan highlights his own epic ethos: the desire to not speak for all, or for nation, but for a much larger dynamic, planetary system. As Duncan notes further, 'the commune of Poetry' has the ability to sound 'each particle in relation to parts of a great story' (2014: 297). This idea of contributing to a 'great story'—though initially suggesting perhaps an entanglement with myth—also subtly challenges that very idea by re-routing poetic mythmaking back into the particulars of the every day, where to write 'what is' is but the 'deepest myth', where 'what is happening in Poetry moves us as it moves words' (2014: 298). Finding the mythical subject in the poem itself then, Duncan emphasises the role language plays in meaning- and world-making. Furthermore, this aligns Duncan's language-centric process-based approach with Roland Barthes's suggestion that if a writer is to write anti-mythically, then they must interrogate the very tools used to create mythic material: language itself. As Barthes states:

The subversion of writing was the radical act by which a number of writers have attempted to reject Literature as a mythical system. Every revolt of this kind has been a murder of Literature as signification: all have postulated the reduction of literary discourse to a simple semiological system ... (1973: 135)

For me, Duncan's engagement with writing as a semiological system – indeed, his desire to remain aware of how language is but a 'rivering web' that 'rises among wits and senses / gathering the wool into its full cloth' – highlights how *Passages* replaced Eliot's mythical method with what I earlier termed the compositional method. This approach to poetry also speaks to the central aim of this essay, to argue that this anti-epic approach to poetics refutes the modernist penchant for speaking declaratively about the world and instead affects a sense that the world is revelling in its own wording.

Beyond the compositional method of individual poems, as well as the anti-epic never-ending approach to the long poem, it is useful to shed further light on Duncan's own view of the epic ambitions of his modernist predecessors. As Duncan states, 'Genericly [sic] ... *Passages* is not of the order of the *Cantos* or *Maximus*' (in Quartermain 2014: xliii), and 'Must I reiterate the fact that the boundary lines in the poem belong to the poem and not to the town?' (Duncan 2014: 297). Poking fun at Olson's and Williams' attempts to transform places into heroic subjects in their own mythmaking epics (Gloucester, Massachusetts in *Maximus Poems*; Paterson, New Jersey in *Paterson*), Duncan also ironically points to the unique contradiction of Laurie Duggan's own antipodean redeployment of the long serial poem. For despite taking a similarly



open-ended approach to poetics in *Blue Hills* – one guided not by the mythical ambition of capturing ‘the oneness of everything’ but its ‘relatedness’ (DuPlessis 2020: par. 25) – Duggan nevertheless explicitly engages with specific localities in Australia. In doing so, I argue his serial poem meets, head on, the exploitative and mytho-nationalist approach early settler Australian poetic movements, such as the Bush Balladeers and Jindyworobaks, took to writing about ‘Australia’. However, as I will attempt to show, it is within the very ‘anti-epic’ nature of the serial poem that Duggan finds a more anti-mythic way to navigate the ethically fraught venture of writing about First Nations lands as a settler complicit in the occupation, destruction, and poetic misappropriation / mythologisation of those very lands.

### 5. A Seinfeldian Deceit: *Blue Hills* as Anti-Epic

*Blue Hills* takes the reader across a great swathe of Australia’s south-east, linking the poet’s decades-long interest in writing poetry not just *about* but *with* place. To first illustrate the geographical range of the series, below I share a chronological list of specific suburbs, towns, and cities the poet names in the series. For me, this evokes the island-hopping sensation one feels as they go from poem to poem in what I call the *Blue Hills* archipelago:

\*Canberra – Brindabella – Melbourne – Bega – Combienbar – Bemboka – Wollongong – Scarborough – Waterfall – Coalcliff – Otford – Tailem Bend – Callington – Ambleside – Glen Valley – Sunnyside – Jingellic – Dora Dora – Marrawah – Kilcunda – Bass – Warragul – Licola – Poowong – Williamstown – Mentone – Petersham – Mittagong – Hurlstone Park – Vernon Terrace – Moreton Bay – Bulimba – Chermside – Stradbroke and Moreton Islands – The Domain – Haymarket – Port Philip Bay – Campsie – Newtown – Bondi – Marrickville – Sydenham – Ball’s Head – McMahan’s Point – Berry’s Bay – Tallangatta – Corryong – Botany Bay

*\*Repetitions have been omitted*

Given each poem in the series displays a direct attunement to ‘place’ – and considering the series’ decades-long composition – on the surface one might think of *Blue Hills* as descending from the longform site-specific epic tradition in 20th-century Anglo-American modernist poetry. As Duggan himself has noted, Pound, Eliot, and Williams rate among his key influences (in Brown 2013). It would, however, be wrong to describe *Blue Hills* as epic in its scope as are the modernist epic texts above, for unlike their mythopoetic ambitions, *Blue Hills* doesn’t seek to create a ‘world-sized’ imaginary that might provide a complete and comprehensive portrait of the culture and society in which Duggan lives (Nichols 2020: par. 1). Rather, in line with the North American anti-epic serial poem tradition and its compositional method, it uses place to acknowledge the difficulty of writing an ‘epic’ poem in a geo-historical and postcolonial context where ‘many competing versions of the world’ exist (Nichols 2020: par. 1). This anti-epic *as* anti-mythic determination is also overtly reflected in the poems themselves. To provide one brief example, we can look to the opening lines of ‘Blue Hills 22’, which instead of mythologising the idea of Australia, critiques the very foundation of that colonial-capitalist project:

As though local history were  
an endless succession of ownerships,  
boundaries drawn and redrawn,  
fresh signatures, the families mapped  
from highland chieftains to shire presidents

and later in the poem:

The country cannot come to terms  
with its suburbanism; parks named  
after a man who discovered nothing more  
than property

Refusing to celebrate or mythologise ‘local history’, thus feeding Jeanine Leane’s idea of the ‘setter mythscape’ – the ‘stories’ settler Australians invented and imported to establish the ‘founding myth of nation’ (2020) – the poem instead critiques settler society within a greater narrative of land ‘ownership’, a concept introduced to the Australian continent through colonisation. One of settler Australia’s foundational ‘ecopoets’, Judith Wright, similarly claimed that this idea of ‘ownership’ was the basis of the ‘Australian Myth’: the ‘whole legislative and economic system’ settlers created based on the anthropocentric idea, embodied in Terra Nullius, that they inhabited a ‘virtually unlimited country’ (1992: 57). Though a brief excerpt, it provides one example of the way Duggan overtly refutes to poetically celebrate Australia’s colonisation and, in that, rejects the central mythopoetic ambitions of early settler Australian poetic movements, such as the Bush Balladeers and Jindyworobaks, who used poetry to erect a self-mythologising edifice of epic proportions.

Though I lack the space for a comprehensive survey of the Balladeers and Jindyworobaks, one central ‘epic’ example can be seen in the Jindyworobak poet Rex Ingamells’s aptly titled poem, *The Great South Land: An Epic Poem* (1951). In this work, Ingamells traces the history of ‘Australia’ from the beginnings of earth down to his present day. Spread across twelve books, it can perhaps be seen as one of settler Australia’s most significant attempts at a modernist epic à la Eliot’s ‘mythical method’. Additionally, or rather, disastrously, this epic work sought to affect the poetic mythologising of Australia through the appropriation, or rather *misappropriation*, of First Nations culture, philosophy, and history. As Ivor Indyk has noted, one of the overarching aims of the Jindyworobak group was to create a type of pastoral poetry that might ‘express an Aboriginal apprehension of the landscape’ (1993: 847). This can be seen, for example, in ‘Book Two: The Aborigines’ (1951: 37), in which Ingamells writes:

My heart is called to mystic sympathy  
before old burial trees and bora-grounds,  
and when my hands take hold of sacred objects,  
the tjurunga and ceremonial shields

In this excerpt, Ingamells reduces the spiritual significance of the sacred ‘Tjurunga’ to an object the poet simply takes hold of. A physical action which for ‘outsiders or uninitiated members’ of a community not only broke traditional laws and customs but was, as Jane Dickins notes, punishable by death (Dickins 2011: 166). The fact the poet purports to hold such an item in his hands ironically signals his own ignorance towards, or overt rejection of, First Nations customs. The Jindyworobak attempt to hybridise, as Evelyn Araluen has noted, ‘Eurocentric and Aboriginal culture ... translating the difference of that land into jargon and misappropriated cryptomythology’ (Araluen 2019) further sheds light on Ingamells’ attempt to mythologise not only his own secular and idealistic connection to environments, but himself as a type of white saviour of First Nations culture.

Despite Duggan’s overt anti-mythic rejection – as evinced by ‘Blue Hills 22’ above – of Ingamells’ epic attempt to create a culturally appropriative poem that might capture the idea

of a unified 'Australia', here I want to further argue that it is through *Blue Hills*' very structure and composition, as a longform 'anti-epic' serial poem, that the poet also explicitly challenges *both* the modernist epic's mythopoetic ambitions, and the exploitative myth-conceptions of early settler poets.

I am not the first to claim Duggan's *Blue Hills* as a type of anti-epic for its rejection of the idea of a monumental, or 'epic', Australian work. In his 2017 essay, 'Across Time: Laurie Duggan's *Blue Hills*', Tim Wright states that it is Duggan's intermittent approach to longform poetics – one characterised by brief poems that demarcate moments in a great swathe of unspecified time – that suggests Duggan is less interested in building up some heroic, or mythic, image of 'Australia' as a unified idea in his series (as per Ingamells), and more so interested in the act of deconstructing that very idea (2017: 266). In other words, it is through the never-ending 'grand collage' writing praxis (currently 43 years) that defines *Blue Hills* – a time frame that, on the surface, could mark it as 'epic' – as well as the irregularity of the actual writing process, that provides a central way of understanding how Duggan rejects the modernist epic's desire for closure and cohesion. As Sherman Paul notes, a key ambition of the modernist epic was to use a structure that 'encloses', 'frames', and 'guides' the poem: an aesthetic strategy that leads him to read the modernist epic as essentially a 'closed poem' (2019: 37–38). This claim is further substantiated by the fact that 'literally on his deathbed', he writes, Charles Olson 'felt compelled to designate to his literary executor the final poem of *Maximus* so that if the manuscript finally lacked the kind of cohesion to which he aspired, it would most certainly have closure' (37–38). To exemplify the more overt rejection of closure and cohesion in Duggan's open-ended series, I share the 'last' poem of *The Collected Blue Hills* (2012), 'Blue Hills 75'. Written in Brisbane, this poem edges toward some form of summation or reflection:

Precession  
the light  
at 5 am, moving  
into the room  
to shift  
a hemisphere, awake a different hour  
the broken trail on my palm  
might signify  
reflections  
from the opposite bank  
to take on trust

Exemplifying the poet's penchant for allowing poems to emerge in conversation with his own being in the world, the poet uses an image of a 'broken trail' on his 'palm' to suggest it 'might signify / reflections'. Setting the poem up for some last sincere remark, the 'reflections' are, however, ironically deflected to the 'opposite bank' of what we can assume to be the Maiwar (Brisbane River), from where the vague, sweeping idea 'to take on trust' emerges.

For me, these last lines can be interpreted in two ways. The first, as a satirical remark – a reading which would align with the poet's passion for irony and satire (see *Adventures in Paradise*, 1982 or *The Epigrams of Martial*, 1989). The second interpretation, however, might consider the fact that Duggan, by acknowledging the reflection emerges from the 'opposite bank' and not from his own palm, i.e., his own *self*, is making a subtle remark to *not trust* in his own secular reflections. In other words, it perhaps presents a statement of poetic intent: a way of capturing

how he seeks to embrace, like Duncan, the particulars of the everyday, where to write 'what is' is but the 'deepest myth', where 'what is happening in Poetry moves us as it moves words' (Duncan 2014: 298). This latter interpretation would also speak to the fact that twelve years after the publication of *The Collected Blue Hills*, the series continued as if it had never been 'collected'.

Given my anti-epic categorisation of *Blue Hills* it is, however, important to reflect on how that categorisation is nevertheless *tentative*, for it does not consider how the poem series locates itself in, nor Duggan's awareness of, the unique geo-historical context with which it engages. As a nation-state, Australia has continually sought to assert an image of itself as a homogenous, unified nation through the systemic promotion of a racially charged founding narrative that still today attempts to negate the sovereignty of First Nations People. As Narungga poet Natalie Harkin notes, First Nations People have been locked in a 'story-telling war' since first contact with Europeans; a 'war that still fosters and maintains negative, racialized, stereotyped narratives about who we are, and invades every sense of our sovereignty and resistance' (2021: 18). Though Duggan doesn't speak for First Nations People in *Blue Hills*, I argue that by consciously using the work to upend the 'epic' tradition in western longform poetics, he constructs a work that seeks, through the poem's very composition, to aesthetically demythologise specifically settler conceptions, or narratives, of 'Australia'. To return to Barthes, one might say it is an attempt to disintegrate Australia (as a mythological concept) back into the meanings of the everyday, where every sign holds 'a knowledge, a past, a memory' (1973: 117).

This may seem like a loaded argument for a poem series whose 'virtues', the poet tells us, 'stem from the poems *not* having made any promises to begin with' (2012: 5). However, despite setting (or sending) up *Blue Hills* as a sort of *Seinfeld* of Australian poetry ('a poem about nothing'), the poet's anti-epic ideology toward the series also provides another way of viewing it as an anti-ideological anti-mythic. Take the seven lines from 'Blue Hills 7' (Duggan 2012: 14) as a brief example:

(Waterfall)

Waterloo Sunset (Ted Berrigan)  
The F6 below

COME TO ST. JOHN'S  
WHERE MEN MEET GOD

Yogi Bear smiling  
in a paddock

Using found texts and images to track his passing through space, here Duggan doesn't say anything overtly didactic about the place he passes through but defers his intentions to a milieu of images. To get to the heart of understanding the function of Duggan's localised redeployment of the anti-epic though – or rather, to read the grand collage nature of *Blue Hills* as an attempt to de-structure what Leane defined as Australia's 'settler mythscape' (2020) – it is necessary to address whether despite the series' subversively minimalist, yet expansive, engagement with different places, and given the poet's status as a settler, *Blue Hills* can nevertheless be considered yet another mythopoetic chapter in Australia's colonial narrative (albeit one that is simply vaguer, fragmented, and overtly avoids addressing the poet's implication in that narrative). For as John Kinsella states, 'poetry can decolonise but too often colonises, even

when it intends to oppose colonisation' (2021: 137). To approach an answer, I turn to the idea of the archipelago alluded to in the title of this essay.

### 6. Thinking Archipelagically, Thinking Ecologically: Islanding *Blue Hills*

In his essay 'Archipelagos of sense: thinking about a decolonised Australian poetics' (2013), First Nations poet and theorist Peter Minter develops an archipelagic approach to reading Australian poetry. He notes his methodology draws on three key sources. First, from a poem by Les Murray, 'Kimberley Brief', the first 3 lines of which state, 'With modern transport, everywhere you go / the whole world is an archipelago, / each place an island in a void of travel' (cited Minter 2013: 155). Second, from poet John Mateer's conception of Australia as not just *one* island but an archipelago of islands made up of 'cities and communities of habitus separated by vast distances but connected in networks of 'internal and external commerce' of objects, words, emails, ideas, poems, songs, photographs, music' (2006: 164). Mateer first put forth this idea in his essay, 'Australia is not an island', to upend the 'mistaken belief' that the diverse cultures and artistic practices that emerge from each unique island could be 'grouped under ... one cultural discourse, that of the nation' (2006: 91). Last, Minter draws on the writings of revolutionary Martinican novelist, poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant. Glissant himself coined the term 'archipelagic thought' to describe a 'poetic and imaginative vision of the world' that proposes a 'non-systematic, inductive' way of exploring 'the unforeseen of the world-totality' through a poetics of relation (Glissant in Minter 2013: 164). Ultimately, the aim of Glissant's 'archipelagic thought', as Minter asserts, was to 'define a cultural and aesthetic space that is post-identitarian, anti-essentialist and anti-colonial' (2013: 164).

Adapting Glissant's own archipelagic method, Minter argues that it may provide a way of viewing 'locations on the surface of the planet ... as earthly temporal and spatial archipelagos', or as outcrops 'of sensibility amidst oceans of inscrutability' (2013: 156). Regarding the analysis of Australian poetry more specifically, Minter suggests it may provide theorists with a way of keeping 'things local, as nodes in constantly evolving networks, rather than trying to universalise a totalising idea about Australian poetry' (2013: 160–61). For me, the overarching aim of this anti-canonical approach to *reading* poetry holds great similarities to Duncan's 'grand collage' approach to *writing* poetry (2014: 268). For, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis noted, Duncan's approach didn't seek to apply a 'unified field theory' to writing the world, but rather, through an unending process-based composition, rejected homogenising notions of 'oneness' in favour of a poetics of 'relatedness' (2020: par. 24, 25).

To return to the anti-mythic premise of my argument here: might this grand-collage-cum-archipelagic approach provide not only an alternative 'non-systematic, inductive' way of reading Australian poetry, but an alternate way of writing poetry about Australia as well? By that I mean, if a poet were to attune themselves to the local and acknowledge it as a node in a 'constantly evolving network', could they then similarly gesture toward a 'renewed ethical and aesthetic architecture' that might 'transform how we represent our particular lived habitats, right here and now' (Minter 2013: 156–57 160)? For as Minter further remarks, his archipelagic approach to reading may have the potential to upset 'normative ideas about nation, cultural and ideological homogeneity' (2013: 160).

By drawing on Minter's conceptualisation, I suggest that perhaps the *Blue Hills* poems, for their direct attunement to a variety of specific locales, and *Blue Hills* as a whole, for its postmodernist anti-epic vision *à la* Duncan's 'grand collage', can be read as the poetic actualisation of Minter's

archipelagic approach to reading poetry. Through this focalisation, we can see how the poet is not busy with evoking normative ideas of a homogenous nation but is seeking to be at ease in an open-ended relation to different environments (Minter 2013: 160). This approach challenges not only the modernist epic's attempt to capture 'the spirit of the age' (Johns-Putra 2006: 171), but also the central nation-building ambitions of early settler Australian poetic movements.

To exemplify Duggan's localised, relational approach to writing, and in that, his overt rejection of a Jindyworobakesque universalisation of 'Australia', take the following excerpts from four *Blue Hills* poems which illustrate the archipelagic nature of the series as a whole.

'Blue Hills 2' (2012: 9):

Junction of the Brogo and Bega rivers,  
one dry, one running under sand;  
smoke haze as thick as Sydney smog

– dried bamboo would explode  
if a match were lit

A crazed accountant sits at a desk in the park  
On the desk

Erica 4 Brian  
I WANT TO SUCK COCKS

Log trucks cross the Bega flood bridge;  
all the poets have moved to Sydney

'Blue Hills 33' (2012: 46):

Peripherally the landscape re-assembles  
bend by bend up Mt Eccles,  
comprehensive drainage patterns glimpsed through the dust:  
depths broken by lines of pollarded imports,  
eucalypts isolated or clumped on rises  
and the soil, red-ochre, where the surface is broken.

'Blue Hills 53' (2012: 68):

powder blue, then  
  
cerise over magenta  
  
trucks on the Gateway bridge  
  
a glittering airliner

'Blue Hills 76' (2020: 32):

sun on the underside of clouds  
a perception of red lakes  
then heat



a hint of breeze  
then stillness  
  
shades of leaves on a kitchen bench  
  
insect furrows in eucalypt bark

Taking the reader from the border of Victoria and NSW in the first poem to a scene in western Victoria, then Brisbane, and lastly Sydney, the poems emphasise the island-hopping sensation one feels as they go from poem to poem in Duggan's poetic archipelago. On the level of individual poems, I feel we also see Duggan, as per Duncan, embrace a 'non-systematic, inductive' way of exploring 'the unforeseen of the world-totality' through a poetics of relation (Glissant in Minter 2013: 164). For example, in the third poem – 'powder blue, then / cerise over magenta / trucks on the Gateway bridge / a glittering airliner' – the poet doesn't seek to say anything declarative about the place he finds himself in, but rather, in the manner of an Objectivist poet, defers his authorial intentions to 'aesthetic objects' that express the world in its own wording (Altieri 1979: 12). The centrality of this process-based approach cannot be understated, as the poet himself once noted in a diary entry: 'The problem is how to write without any overriding consciousness of the writing, how to let something appear' (Duggan in Wright 2017: 258). To return to the mythical implications of such a process-based poetics of relation, this provides a way to read *Blue Hills*, like *Passages*, as 'the endless presentation of 'what is' on many scales' (DuPlessis 2020: par. 24), where 'what is' is but the 'deepest myth' (Duncan 2014: 298).

### 7. Conclusion: A 'Work in Process': *Blue Hills* as an 'Ecological Anti-Epic'

In concluding my long poem discussion, I'd like to end with a reflection on the correlations between the process-based aesthetic of the anti-epic serial poem and Connor Weightman's idea of the 'ecological long poem' (2020: 3). I begin with Weightman's own attempt to deduce the difference between the modernist epic and the contemporary ecological long poem:

if long poems derive from a lineage of writing that attempted to perform a totalising work of culture, a contemporary ecological long poem might therefore be attempting to capture the totality of a problem that continually evades action ... (2020: 3)

Though Weightman's study centres on why the long poem can be thought of as 'a receptive medium for writing about problems particular to the Anthropocene, which are difficult to contain within assumed boundaries of specialist knowledge' (2020: 3), his study also touches on the centrality of 'process' to the ecological long poem, highlighting a key link between his conception of the 'ecological long poem' and my reading of the postmodernist anti-epic. Citing Neil Harris's term 'the operational aesthetic', he goes on to argue that the long ecological poem, as opposed to offering a 'didactic or polemical' approach to writing (as per the modernists):

builds on the difficulty of saying anything closed-ended or conclusive ... Rather, the process of representation becomes about the finding out – in fact relies on the idea 'that such chains of events can be more interesting than their suspended resolution' (Brash 2018: 49). Arguably, then, this aesthetic acts as complementary counterpoint to the sublime response, which alone is liable to make the reader turn away. (2020: 9–10)

Weightman's assertion that the long ecological poem, as a type of *work in progress*, can act as a 'counterpoint' to more sublime responses, speaks to the way it can challenge more close-ended or conclusive approaches to writing about environments, as exemplified by the epic ambitions of Anglo-American male modernist poets, or the nationalistic poetic projects of the Bush Balladeers and Jindyworobaks. For me, it also highlights the shared aims of Weightman's conceptualisation of the long ecological poem; Duncan's and Duggan's grand collage serial poems; as well as Minter's and Glissant's respective relational, archipelagic methodologies. To further stress this connection, it is useful to return to Duncan's own ecologically enthused 'grand collage' aims: what he described as an expansive poetic form that might allow one to trace a 'reality-in-flux continually struggling toward form without being itself formless – and in which everything coexists' (in Quartermain 2014: xxxix).

More recently, long poem scholar AJ Carruthers has further remarked on the centrality of process to not only Duggan's *Blue Hills*, but also to his entire oeuvre. As Carruthers states, Duggan's poetry can be read as 'one immense long poem, a work in process (and always process, experiment), whose open, disjunctive and decentered structures stand corporeally inside time and culture, but stubbornly outside of Nation' (Carruthers 2015). Stressing how an attunement to process may provide a decentred, and in that, anti-nationalistic, approach to writing Australia, we can encounter yet another way of reading Duggan's process-based approach to the long poem as an early example of a uniquely anti-epic, and in that, anti-mythic, attempt to write Australian environments. For me then, Duggan's *Blue Hills* provides just one way to understand how the poet has sought – through an experimental long poem that is both anti-mythic *and* ecological in its engagement with specific places – to refute the modernist penchant for speaking declaratively about the world and instead affect a sense that the world is revelling in its own wording. A reading that allows us to view Duggan as a poet actively seeking to add a type of anti-mythic chapter to Leane's idea of the 'settler mythscape' (Leane 2020).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Passages*, as an uncollected series (1968–1987), was never collected into one publication. The *Passages* I reference were taken from a variety of collections scattered throughout the *Collected Poems & Later Plays*.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to stress that the mytho-epic ambitions of the modernists was a trait largely unique to male writers. For example, although H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* is an epic poem obsessed with myth, it can also be read as an overtly feminist subversion of that very genre, as it seeks to retell the story surrounding Homer's *The Odyssey* from the perspective of the central female figure, Helen of Troy. As Johns-Putra notes, H.D.'s poem sought not only the revision of a key Homeric figure 'marginalised by epic tradition' (2006: 178), but to critique how 'myth and the wholeness it promises' is 'unavailable to a feminist poetics' (2006: 179). It is for a future study that I hope to conduct a matrilineal survey of the 'anti-epic' to argue that its origination is perhaps best situated in a feminist poetics.

<sup>3</sup> A quote from American poet Robert Lowell sheds further light on my reading of modernist epics as mytho-poetic attempts to perform a type of totalising work of culture. Describing William Carlos Williams' epic *Paterson* as 'an attempt to write the American Poem' (in Meyer 2005: 63), today his quote leaves us to ask, among other things, which America exactly? North? South? Central? And whose America exactly? Mexican? African? European?

## Works cited

Araluen, Evelyn 2019 Snugglepot and Cuddlepie in the ghost gum, *Sydney Review of Books* (11 February), [www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/snugglepot-and-cuddlepie-in-the-ghost-gum-evelyn-araluen/](http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/snugglepot-and-cuddlepie-in-the-ghost-gum-evelyn-araluen/)

Altieri, Charles 1979 The objectivist tradition, *Chicago Review* 30.3: 5–22, [www.doi.org/10.2307/25303858](http://www.doi.org/10.2307/25303858)

Barthes, Roland 1973 *Mythologies* (trans A Lavers), London: Paladin Books

Brown, Pam 2013 An interview with Laurie Duggan, *linked deletions* (10 March), [www.linkeddeletions.blogspot.com/2013/03/an-interview-with-laurie-duggan.html](http://www.linkeddeletions.blogspot.com/2013/03/an-interview-with-laurie-duggan.html)

Carbery, Matthew 2019 *Phenomenology and the Late Twentieth-Century American Long Poem*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan

Carruthers, AJ 2015 Review short: Laurie Duggan's *East & Under the Weather*, *Cordite Poetry Review* (16 June), <http://cordite.org.au/reviews/carruthers-duggan/>

Dickins, Jane 1996 A remote analogy?: from Central Australian 'tjurunga' to Irish Early Bronze Age Axes, *Antiquity* 70: 161–67, [www.doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00083022](http://www.doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00083022)

Duggan, Laurie 2006 Amaze your friends!, *TEXT* 10.1, [www.textjournal.com.au/april06/duggan.htm](http://www.textjournal.com.au/april06/duggan.htm)

Duggan, Laurie 2012 *The Collected Blue Hills*, Glebe: Puncher and Wattmann

Duggan, Laurie 2020 *Homer Street*, Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing

Duncan, Robert 2014 *The Collected Later Poems & Plays* (ed., Peter Quartermain), Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press

Duncan, Robert 1968 *Bending the Bow*, New York: New Directions Press

- DuPlessis, Rachael Blau 2020 Robert Duncan's long poem debates and his poetics of grand collage, *Sillages critiques* 29, [www.doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.10087](http://www.doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.10087)
- Eliot, TS 1923 Ulysses, order, and myth, *The Dial* LXXV.5 (November): 480–83, [http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/major/Joyce\\_JA/pdfs/TS\\_Eliot\\_Dial.pdf](http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/major/Joyce_JA/pdfs/TS_Eliot_Dial.pdf)
- Harkin, Natalie 2021 Our poetic justice, in Dan Disney and Mathew Hall (eds.), *New Directions in Contemporary Australian Poetry*, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.15–30
- Indyk, Ivor 1993 Pastoral and priority: The Aboriginal in Australian Pastoral, *New Literary History* 24.4: 837–55, [www.doi.org/10.2307/469397](http://www.doi.org/10.2307/469397)
- Ingamells, Rex 1951 *The Great South Land: An Epic Poem*, Melbourne: Georgian House
- Johns-Putra, Adeline 2006 *The History of the Epic*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Keller, Lynn 1997 *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Kinsella, John 2021 Disembodying and reembodying the poem as act of acknowledgment of land rights and a rejection of 'property': On acts and actioning of environmentally concerned poetry, in Dan Disney & Matthew Hall (eds.), *New Directions in Australian Poetry*, Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.133–44
- Leane, Jeanine 2020 Living on stolen land: Deconstructing the settler mythscape, *Sydney Review of Books* (6 November), [www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/kwaymullina-living-on-stolen-land/](http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/kwaymullina-living-on-stolen-land/)
- Leane, Jeanine 2022 *Unwinding Australia: The politics of evasion post-Mabo. Barry Andrews Memorial Lecture, The Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference (4 July)*, University of Tasmania
- Mateer, John 2006 Australia is not an island, *Meanjin* 65.1: 89–93
- Meyer, Kinereth 2005 William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, and the cultural uses of pastoral, *William Carlos Williams Review* 25.1 (Spring): 63–78
- Minter, Peter 2013 Archipelagos of sense: Thinking about a decolonised Australian poetics, *Southerly* 73.1: 155–69
- Editors 2023 Modernism, *Poetry Foundation*, [www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism)
- Nichols, Miriam 2020 Robert Duncan's big poetry: Re-visioning the common, *Sillages critique* 29, [www.doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.10312](http://www.doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.10312)
- Paul, Sherman 1989 *Hewing to Experience: Essays and Reviews on Recent American Poetry and Poetics, Nature and Culture*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press
- Quartermain, Peter 2014 Introduction, in Robert Duncan, *The Collected Later Poems & Plays*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, xxv–lii
- Seibt, Johanna 2022 Process philosophy, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (rev. 5 May), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/>
- Twitchell-Waas, Jeffrey 2015 The forms of A: meeting by chance or design, *Z-site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukofsky*, <https://z-site.net/z-notes-commentary-on-lz/>
- Weightman, Connor 2020 A long problem, *Axon: Creative Explorations* 10.1, [www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/10-1/long-problem](http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/10-1/long-problem)
- Wright, Judith 1992 Conservation: Choice or compulsion? *Going on Talking*, Springwood: Butterfly Books, pp. 57–66

Wright, Tim 2017 Across time: Laurie Duggan's *Blue Hills, Antipodes* 31.2: 252–69, <https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.31.2.0252>

Zukofsky, Louis 1931 Sincerity and objectification: With special reference to the work of Charles Reznikoff, *Poetry* 37.5: 272–85

---

### About the author

Dr Jake Goetz is a poet and emerging scholar who recently completed a DCA in Writing and Literature at the Writing & Society Research Centre (WSU). He has published two collections of poetry: *meditations with passing water* (Rabbit, 2018), shortlisted for the QLD Premiers Awards in 2019, and *Unplanned Encounters: Poems 2015-2020* (Apothecary Archive, 2023). His third collection, *Holocene Pointbreaks*, will be released in 2024. He is currently the Reviews Editor at Plumwood Mountain and lives on Gadigal land.

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/cjldenknpy

**Keywords:** poetry, fusion poetry,  
experimental poetry, poetry structure

## FUSION POEMS

Owen Bullock

*University of Canberra*, ORCID: 0000-0002-2520-3766



## FUSION POEMS

Owen Bullock

### Twelve notes & time

take these twelve notes & time  
contain

*a sip in it*

*anything with cream*

*luckylove*

droning blue retreat

the truth of 'you' and 'I' . . .  
desire's not love

can I choose happiness?  
this languid heat  
graffitied fridge

the city for people  
who wolf-whistle, mumble loudly  
wear weird clothes  
talk to strangers

*my favourite tool is 'quick'*  
*doing root canals –*  
*this is the tooth I saw on Christmas Eve*

less invasive than last time  
it still feels like several strangers  
stumbling around  
in the corridors of my brain

*scaffling*  
she wrote of sadness

white grey  
corella against  
white grey sky

*pencilling*  
to recover

grief is beautiful  
it means we loved

*If you appreciate what you have, you appreciate what I've lost.*

a lone red parrot  
on the wire –  
good morning, brother

### **Weedself**

I want to go into the caves in Margarita Georgiadis' painting  
into the Turner vibes  
posture: dancer, or the crucified

*Do you feel you're able to be yourself?*

I buy the most beautiful doily in the world  
with extra doils  
and an orange paper-woven chequered card that says:  
*You are a fabulous work of art*

word of the day:  
weedself

**Mine**

*Is there any legal sense in which the mine's activities/proposals  
disregard our rights as citizens to live where we choose, unmolested?*

mist, grey  
condensation, cloud

artworks cellar

you can't be yourself  
because it affects someone else

do you respond to surface  
or subtext?

*wanhope*

*Hitching rides on droplets . . . we know something now about microbes.*

when I didn't ought to be

waiting on the bus –  
a map open  
on her phone

training field –  
*go go go go go*

*too cute to be suss*

*cracklure*  
[hairline cracks in paintings]

sparkles on the water I give up counting

when will it be enough?

enough  
enough

**Hearing (taking off?)**

hearing her wrong again  
*pink cordless reptile*  
should have been  
*pink corduroy reptile*

*the song of a thousand lumps*

soft, it accepts my hand  
doesn't fight  
is picked up  
when I pick it up  
is thrown into the air  
when I throw it into the air,  
into pattern  
it doesn't disagree  
it falls  
when I fail –  
*if you're not dropping*  
*you're not learning*

gust of fire . . .  
the hot air balloon  
floats up

*He went wrong way*  
*down wrong way street*

**Love & liveliness**

townstampfragrances

houndlamppaganses

soundprankcadences

I just can't concentrate for long enough to be at war.

the fern's  
curly edges –  
what are mine?

light spots  
on shadows –  
evening silence

nerikomi vase  
subtler  
thoughts

blanket  
round your shoulders  
winter viewing

shadows  
on the ceiling –  
projecting again?

another  
chess game, exit  
program

'a battle of ideas' –  
but I don't want to battle

your photos  
tapestry, jasmine  
leaf puddles

\*

Dracula's castle –  
a shipment of  
expanding foam

*I like mystical things, Barry, like teeth.*

\*

*Her broken voice said rejoice! I have no fear, I'm not in any pain, I didn't know such happiness was possible – do you know we went to the beach last week, for three hours.*

*We've always communicated non-verbally, and we'll carry on doing that.*



## Equinox

winter  
the cormorant  
wobbles its wings

morning  
after equinox  
light spreads out

Charles Tournemire's twelfth prelude  
the first four notes  
of the North Island bellbird's song

*clay whisperer . . .*  
*shuddup!*

\*

*Voodoo*

*You-m a viddy Bullock*

Centrifugive, fructal, sitting with a hot-enough drink, handle pressenough, one thing at a time enough, prepared, but not all, fissured, through gums, not in pain today (I shall have the crown!), misled, permissled – no one will ever give, permission . . . I fight my way to the screenplay, to talk through Gordon, my hesitant, unresponsive, unromantic, neurodivergent alter. Altar. Walter. His fat overhung his belt. But so what. As Kwame Dawes said, *So it rhymes and pentameters, so what?*

\*

he's singing in his office  
calling out to us

once I'm round the corner  
you know I can't be there

*Do your best*

'What you are, the world is' – Krishnamurti

a step, a step, a step

spin on spinnen spun

as soon as I know nothing  
I explore

\*

the meet up on Tinder  
they have sex  
then see if they want to get to know each other  
but ringing is too intimate . . .

*Length; width; depth; time; probability (possible universes); all possible universes branching from the same start conditions; all possible spectrums of universes with different start positions; a plane of all possible universes, different start conditions; direct movement from one multiverse to another non-adjacent multiverse with different start conditions; infinite possibilities – what a story!*

Ten [one zero] adds nothing.  
Everything is possible (exists somewhere).

I look for me on the internet  
can only find my name  
some things I've written, some essays  
I can't find me on the internet  
only my eyes, squashed into the halo  
of a machine – a machine doesn't  
need a halo, other machines don't care –  
I'm going to have to try again  
to look for what isn't there

*Who am I?*

*Bananas; idealistic, writer; reading; romance; studio arts; orchids; Mahatma Gandhi; yoga; Capricorn.*

*You are The Mediator! You are poetic, kind, generous, idealistic, and calm. You have a reserved attitude, but you have strong principles that you always stand up for. You are also practical, but you manage to stay positive and maintain your strong drive.*

*Bananas, Barry, bananas is the answer!*

people disappear into themselves  
into theory  
into thought  
into religion  
into a leader  
into rules  
into laughter  
into pleasing

this the exciting day

when I finally find out  
what negativity bias means

*As humans, we tend to:*

*Remember traumatic experiences better than positive ones.*

*Recall insults better than praise.*

*React more strongly to negative stimuli.*

*Think about negative things more frequently than positive ones.*

*Respond more strongly to negative events than to equally positive ones.*

Those more attuned to threat are more likely to survive.

Now, most of us aren't struggling to survive. (Verywellmind)

Consider what you've learnt.

Savour positive moments – replay them.

*You had the best boot on that field.*

*You had the best boot on that field.*

*You had the best boot on that field.*

Live as if you've already survived.

\*

>Be me

>cleaning the mould around the windows

>cleaning the handbasin, toilet, shower

>emptying the rubbish

>cleaning out the worm farm, their delicious work

>they've migrated to the top storey

>marvel at their efficiency

>feed out to salvias, celery and chard

>plant leeks, distribute worm juice

>gather ash leaves from the cul-de-sac

>mulch, sweep, water

>wash aphids from the cabbages with soapy water

\*

*Nighthawks at the diner . . .*

The snow bus . . .

monstera

starts sprouting

holes

\*

even her laugh is Cockney

*Geraint, fetch the billhook for Mister Billook.*

*We could afford to browse in the second-hand shops . . .*

I can't now

\*

it is  
and shouldn't be –  
awake early

dirigible me

once again  
the worst doesn't  
happen

red leaves  
in winter  
so easy to forget

choc hocolate  
hoc chocolac  
comforts

\*

rappel  
samite  
Tuyul  
smoking a dart  
ostinato  
divots  
impuissant

crows calling dusk

space, the happy accident

*snappedance*  
sandlark  
landsound

elmcup  
leafstone  
stonebinge  
radiowaste

the Open sign on the inside

salve  
garbles

*leave it open*

To Karol Szymanowski, Variations on a Polish Folk Theme for Piano, Opus 10

thunder me  
escape to  
and for me  
rain me  
gauge me  
with a barrel for a flood

Piano Sonata No.2, Opus 21  
shield me from the one light  
screen

\*

*Do what has to be done, Barry!*

drunken man  
crossing a busy street  
cries out *loser*

*Anarky*

\*

wintery windy

feeling me like . . .

'dead-end mindshafts' – Genni Matty

\*

*The Kiwis aren't here to put socks on centipedes.  
He doesn't look 100.*

'All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone' –  
Blaise Pascal

octogenarian  
bangs her head  
getting into the car –  
*I need sweeties*

gold mine threat –  
why is this  
in my life?

to make me stronger

winter sun  
a skink out  
sunning

lightning  
in the clouds  
just that

*Have good unzonk.*



## Leafprint

printing and leafing

'Stop sharing. Start confessing. Whisper fear by fear, thought by thought, and feeling by uncomfortable feeling upon the page. Things you've found. What you've lost.' – Laurie Steed

I'm afraid I won't get to live there  
I'm afraid I'll be dishonoured, having to negotiate with the mine

racing ahead  
of me in the dark  
dried leaves

\*

wanting to always win, you don't play

borrow me time  
tipping maps off the edge of the world

When the ice began to melt . . .

Jealousy  
Love  
Hunger

Phone  
Tongue  
Pie

Combine in a sentence

Hurdle-burdle  
burkum curdle  
(curly furdle)

scratching through the winter leaves

**Ressies (complex)**

is paintings like two in one, occupied in light/ palette/ detail (Joel Arthur, 'Superman')

what comes  
[the given]

taking notes for the Universe

clouds  
pass slowly  
today's message

\*

*head like a bullet*

The US doesn't seem to realise the message it sends the world: 'it's alright to kill children'.

the 'I' is a joke

Rhyming poetry:  
blort resort contort abort rort consort

not steady water  
steam

*I was asleeping*

leaf after change

blistering clouds

Liszt's seventh etude . . .  
so that's where the pink panther  
sauntered in

first namings are always harsh  
[Siamese to conjoined]

dressed as a priest  
I try on earrings  
they don't look right  
I put them back

light rain  
ten thousand points  
pierce the pond

*In my learned opinion, that's a bloody great pile of earth, Barry.*

not the time to act

The nothing goes right story  
The people don't do their job story  
The that's thrown my day story

clouds  
fluffy and white  
plump me up

the gritchen comes and suddenly I can think 67 moves ahead

\*

Ngunu  
Ninny

here  
there

\*

Sometimes I think I won't survive warped bureaucracies and blithered processes – I'm lucky I'm a poet.

autumn walk –  
a mum murmurs  
to her babe

through the blinds  
and their shadows  
now light

\*

the secrets  
of Belgrade you see  
out the window

Byzantium bling  
Serbian Caesars  
traffic calming

[Ruth Kingston and Tim Brook]

\*

*It's always princes disguised as frogs, never princesses.*

*I bet an ugly man thought of that.*

Tharwa  
where the Thars live

into the mist  
the mystery

hic hac hoc  
conjugate the verb 'hiccup'

recognise a fire by its smoke

*blind crests*

newspaper over cracks  
the only word still legible:  
*chandler*

[Brayshaws Homestead]

watching  
your footsteps – the only point  
is having a good life

*the expansive and isolating wilderness*

*horse-drawn sulkies*

up up up marching the rocks

*continuous as the silken thread*

beardy lichen

\*

in the second-hand book  
a slip of paper with the word  
THINKING

A sign an advertisement a power pole a headline . . .

where was it I saw those appealing capitals?

\*

*The bear has no bicycle.*

The first Norwegian – English phrase book written by an out of work circus animal trainer with an interest in languages.

\*

*Early in the morning, killin trees*

dwelling on the past  
fixating on the future

*Checking that you are who you say you are.*

I always said the only way to verify who I am is to look me in the eye – and now machines at airports do that.

watching  
the water lap  
I feel human

\*

in its place  
the frosted leaf

*Smile!*

No, actually we want to remove the gender stereotyping that says women have to smile all the time; our staff members are professionals, they do research. They should smile when they feel like it.

\*

Silence can't be said.

*I'm venterhypalating, Barry.*

*Insufficient tender process*

dentist  
then  
cake

smiling through the mask  
will my eyes soften  
enough



## Contextualising Essay

I am motivated by the idea of creating a form of poetry that reflects the age in which we live, and the way information comes to us through diverse media sources as well as through our direct experience of the physical world. I'm both a formalist and an anti-formalist. I've been writing lineated poetry since the early eighties, veering between traditional lyricism and more experimental writing. I've been writing and publishing haiku, tanka, haibun (prose and haiku) and renga (collaborative, linked writing) for more than twenty years. I have written and published pantoums, villanelles and sonnets and have more recently attempted sestinas and triolets. I like the way strict forms can be revisited, or reinvented, to see what else we can learn from poetic constraint. I try to invent my own forms. I've dabbled in prose poetry since the early days but became significantly more interested in the form after joining the [Prose Poetry Project group](#), hosted by International Poetry Studies at the University of Canberra, in 2015. I've always had a penchant for found material, which can be eye-opening and surprising, especially from eavesdropped speech.

Despite formal experiments dominating my writing practice, I have kept these structures relatively separate until recently. In my PhD on semiotics and poetry, I started to experiment more regularly with the use of page space and with hybrid forms, taking the haibun as a model for other hybrids. These I called 'sem' poems, included in the collection *Semi* (2017). The first half of my next book, *Work & Play* (also 2017), is composed of prose poems; the second, lineated half includes haiku and tanka sequences and limericks, with a haibun bridging the sections.

In my Fusion poems, I take this trajectory a step further and abandon the previous practice of keeping separate the various forms in which I write. These new poems blend linear experiments, prose poetry, haiku and tanka, and found material. The haibun is again an inspiration; in particular, its employment of the 'link and shift' technique, where terse prose and haiku link but always move forward; the prose provides context for the poetry but it doesn't explain. This technique is eminently transferable to other forms. Fusion poems also accommodate contemporary forms such as The Green Story (see 'Equinox', below), Demotivators and Bottom Gear memes (see 'Growth', Bullock 2021a); I have also created the Bottom Star meme, parodying *The Astrology Podcast*, used in two new poems. Fusion poems both make use of artifice and remove it. They incorporate diverse registers of language.

## Antecedents and trends

The fragment is the principal unit of the Fusion poem. Postmodern works from TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* onwards have possessed fragmentary structures and actively celebrated the fragment as component (Barry 2009: 80; Dix 2011: 328). *The Waste Land* was also an example of what is now called the long poem (see below). James Joyce's wordplay in *Finnegan's Wake* is an inspiration, since some Fusion poems highlight neologisms ('Love & liveliness'; 'Equinox'). In my PhD I studied the work of Alistair Paterson, Alan Loney and Michelle Leggott, all poets who write long works, often sequential or with a fragmentary structure. In particular, Loney's prose poem sequence, 'The erasure tapes', opened up new possibilities for me. Prose poetry enables me to explore narrative a little more fully (often with a surrealist tinge), without long plot threads, but with dialogue and characterisation. Some prose poetry borrows from the aesthetics of the essay, for example, in several collections by Claudia Rankine, an option that I pursue with reference to art exhibitions and philosophy. My study of what Michele Leggott calls 'reticulation' of existing materials (Newman 2015: 111) has further encouraged my use of found texts.

The poetics of bp nichol and his idea of ‘the given’ closely resemble my approach. I didn’t encounter his work until I’d been writing Fusion poems for a couple of years, but as soon as I did, I couldn’t help referencing it (see below, ‘Ressies (complex)’). The given is whatever we encounter in the world, which is constantly reorganising itself and reorganising language; accepting it into our work takes the idea of open form to its conclusion (Nichol 1996). The poets who most inspired this chapter of my writing include New Zealand poet Ya-Wen Ho, whose poems mimic the action of netsurfing (Ho 2012) and Keri Glastonbury’s multireferential and polyvocal writing, with its many internet references (Glastonbury 2018). Glastonbury’s discussion of her strategies in an essay on post-internet poetry provided further inspiration and confidence (Glastonbury 2017). Lyn Hejinian’s idea that ‘Form is not a fixture but an activity’ (Hejinian 1983) is often on my mind, and the form that Fusion poems have taken speaks to that implicit emergence, as well as the perceived need for my own poetic activity to reflect activity in the wider world.

Since embarking on the Fusion poems, I have discovered examples of strategies similar to my own in the work of Australian poets Hazel Smith, with her internet cut and pastes (Smith 2016), and Dominic Symes’ meme celebrations (Symes 2022). I see fusion in other genres, too, such as in Helen Garner’s memoir, *The Yellow Notebook* (2022), which gives an example of how rich and compressed, and even exhausting, the fragmentary work can be (like reading an anthology of haiku and feeling overwhelmed). Michael Winkler’s novel, *Grimmish* (2021), cites Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, a very collage-like work, as an important reference point. Winkler’s book begins with a review of itself (by the author); just a small taster of his multiple strategies.

### *The long poem*

Because of the multiple ingredients of Fusion poems, many of them are long (two pages or more) and seem best suited to the long poem since that affords the space necessary to explore the way their fragments interlink. However, I have broken some poems into shorter works because I feared not being able to publish them in the long form. The longest poem is *Impression*, published as a forty-page chapbook in 2021 by experimental Irish publisher Beir Bua Press (Bullock 2022a).

It has been said that the long poem helps writers explore the boundaries of poetry itself, and it is often associated with prose poetry (Fredman 1983: 3–5; Silliman 2011: n.p.), as well as the materiality of the page (McHale 2004: 260–61). But the term ‘long poem’ is contested, especially since the description of a genre can easily become prescriptive (Friedman 2012: 9). Long poems are often composed of sequences, seldom forming a continuous narrative, otherwise we would probably term them narrative or epic poems. But they possess features of each, in terms of scope, development of narrative and ambition for a larger artefact that represents an aspect of society or the largeness of life itself. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes three subsets of the long poem: epic, quest or assemblage. Contemporary use of the term ‘epic’ might now relate more simply to scale, as opposed to a grand narrative, but the long poem often does include multiple, interrupted or discontinuous narrative elements (DuPlessis 2023: 2). The long poem as quest faces the challenge of establishing and maintaining a goal. The long poem as assemblage encompasses everything, itself a kind of goal, and often includes social critique (DuPlessis 2023: 4–5). Of DuPlessis’ models, the assemblage best describes my work, but I am not attempting to encompass *everything* so much as *anything*; the poems remain snapshots, no matter how large, like haiku itself.

### *Process and affordances*

Each work is effectively a sequence. As well as making use of specific forms, the additional constraint of the Fusion poem lies in maintaining a subtle connection between each fragment, harnessing the link and shift technique. I also borrow from the sensibilities of some forms of renga, where there is a connection between adjoining links but not necessarily between, say, links one and three; other forms of the renga are more thematic. I think of the haibun as a 'self-renga', and, while all the links are provided by the same author, the narrative thread is not necessarily continuous. The approach accommodates the idea that even 'the voice' of a single author is, potentially, multiple (Nelson 2014: 327). I have never been interested in the idea of 'finding my voice' – that would be tremendously limiting. I want to find a hundred voices; then I might realise my potential.

Happily, given that I'm using much found material and a variety of reference points (these are given in italics or quote marks), there often seem to be intrinsic connections between the things I notice – a degree of synchronicity occurs within or as part of the poems' interconnectedness. Another way of articulating the strategy is to say that the poems take free association to an extreme. The writing includes journal entries (some of which are geared towards healing and mindfulness).

Some of the poems refer intra-textually to recurring fictional characters, such as Larry, my North of England alter ego (addressing Barry), called back from previously published works (e.g. Bullock 2021b). Fusion poems combine. Nothing need be excluded; everything is potential material for poetry. My work for a friend and colleague on antimicrobial resistance, for example, is a frequent presence, partly because it brings novel vocabulary and a new register of language.

My partner and I own a piece of land in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is bordered on two sides by a stream, at the end of a No Exit road. We respect the Māori concept of kaitiakitanga, custodianship, and see ourselves as custodians of the land. But the land is under threat from a gold mining company who want to tunnel under Conservation Land at Wharekirauponga. This would mean having a major industrial site 300 metres from our gate. There is no legal framework for compensation. We feel intimidated by a large and wealthy international company and that no one in government is defending us. The events and frustrations of the situation leak into my poetry, along with the accompanying legal jargon.

At a less serious level, Fusion poems celebrate registers of language such as that of rugby commentary, with its sometimes alarming, compression of phrases, such as 'He doesn't look 100' (see below, 'Equinox'). The extraordinary, the profound and the mundane crowd together.

The poems incorporate other projects, such as researching piano music for a screenplay I'm writing about a pianist (see below, 'Equinox' and 'Ressies (complex)'). They make use of what Philip Gross calls 'freesearch' (Gross 2006), responding to impulses to gather information about topics I'm curious about, such as string theory and negativity bias ('Equinox').

Fusion poems celebrate voices beyond my own, featuring heteroglossia in a way that the novel might do, and aiming at a cumulative, Gestalt-like effect. The poems form a kind of confessional of the collective. With their many borrowings from news sites and social media, Fusion poems resemble journalism, but they are not journalism. Sometimes they follow news cycles, such as concerning the disappearance of Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai in 2021 (see 'Over' and 'Time to stop', Bullock 2022b). Disappointingly, news cycles peter out, without resolution, or rather

without proper follow-up on events, favouring the sensational elements (often the beginnings) of stories. Incompleteness is symptomatic of life and so of Fusion poems, which mirrors it; this is the removal of artifice. The contemporary references help keep the work up to date, and, since the writing comments very little on what it refers to (in keeping with good haiku practice), there is perhaps less of the risk that the political poem faces in soon becoming outdated.

Though craft and editing go into the work, Fusion poems highlight the process of selection of material. Another removal of artifice concerns the perceived need for poems to 'make sense'. I can best sum up my approach here through a piece I'm still working on:

They asked me what I thought of the reading. I said the poets were out of touch with reality: everything they said made sense, but life doesn't make sense; I needed to hear some chaos. ('Fluid')

How can life make sense in the post-truth age? Why should poetry make sense? A better question might be, are there no long, messy moments; can they not be represented in poetry? Perhaps this concern is really about whether one wants an escape from 'reality' in reading poetry, or to embrace it. In postmodernism, 'the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation' (Jameson 1991: 14), and I am convinced this is the era in which we live.

Fusion poems have helped me become more engaged with the world, especially through the news. I have written two full collections of them. They take a lot of effort to write, since they subject me to a variety of points of view that can become overwhelming. The intensity with which I was writing them has now eased, but I have learnt a lot from experimenting in this way, particularly through exploring the fragment and the haibun model in diverse ways. The Out of the Ordinary conference call for papers asked the question, 'How do poems relate to the world they proceed from or create? What is the world of the poem?' My answer to that question is, the world I live in, the world of many voices, all vying for attention, attention that, as far as I am able, I want to give.

### Works cited

Barry, P 2009 *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

Bullock, O 2021a A poetry showcase from Owen Bullock, *Fevers of the Mind*, 20 December, at <https://feversofthemind.com/2021/12/20/a-poetry-showcase-from-owen-bullock/> (accessed 20 December 2021)

Bullock, O 2021b Larry in lockdown, *Meniscus* 9.1: 86

Bullock, O 2022a *Impression*, Tipperary: Beir Bua Press

Bullock, O 2022b Five fusion poems, *Otoliths* 66 (Winter), <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2022/05/owen-bullock.html> (accessed 1 August 2022)

Dix, A 2011 Postmodernism, in J Wolfreys (ed), *The English Literature Companion*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 327–30

DuPlessis, RB 2023 *A Long Essay on the Long Poem: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Practices*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press

Fredman, S 1983 *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- Friedman, SS 2012 When a 'long' poem is a 'big' poem: Self-authorizing strategies in women's twentieth-century 'long poems', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 2.1: 9–25
- Glastonbury, K 2017 What if John Forbes had been around to live tweet during Q & A?, *Axon: Creative Explorations* 7.2, <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/7-2/what-if-john-forbes-had-been-around-live-tweet> (accessed 12 December)
- Glastonbury, K 2018 *Newcastle Sonnets*, Sydney: Giramondo
- Gross, P 2006 A walk in the abstract garden: How creative writing might speak for itself in universities, *Writing in Education* 1, <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/a-walk-in-the-abstract-garden-how-creative-writing-might-speak-for-itself-in-universities.html?fbclid=IwAR38m47Cr-isl-Zw1BypvBax0xeDFsHw8GX-UAAWcPV00pBH-sSwiQl8yyA> (accessed 10 March 2019)
- Hejinián, L 2009 [1983] The rejection of closure, *Poetry Foundation*, [https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69401/the-rejection-of-closure\\_](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69401/the-rejection-of-closure_) (accessed 2 February 2019)
- Ho, Y 2012 *Last edited [insert time here]*, Hawaii, Tinfish
- Jameson, F 1991 *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Capital of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso
- McHale, B 2004 *The Obligation towards the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press
- Nelson, E 2014 Writing as method: Depth psychological research and archetypal voice, *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* (December): 324–36
- Newman, J 2015 Listening harder: Reticulating poetic tradition in Michele Leggott's 'Blue Irises', *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 33:1: 110–27
- Nichol, BP 1996 Some thots on The Martyrology Book VI: Halfway thru, in G Geddes (ed) *20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry and Poetics* (4th ed.), Toronto: Oxford University Press, 862–66
- Silliman, R 2011 Un-scene, ur-new: The history of the longpoem and 'The collage poems of drafts', *Jacket2*, <http://jacket2.org/article/un-scene-ur-new> (accessed 24 June 2014)
- Smith, H 2016 *Word Migrants*, Sydney: Giramondo
- Symes, D 2022 *I Saw the Best Memes of My Generation*, Canberra: Recent Work Press

---

### About the author

Owen Bullock's latest poetry collection is *Pancakes for Neptune* (Recent Work Press, 2023), following three other poetry titles, five books of haiku, a bilingual edition of tanka, and a novella. His research interests include creative arts and wellbeing; haikai literature; poetry and process; semiotics and poetry; prose poetry; and collaboration. His scholarly work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, *New Writing*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Social Alternatives*, *TEXT* and *Westerly*. He is Discipline Lead for Creative Writing and Literary Studies at the University of Canberra. <https://poetry-in-process.com/> @OwenTrail

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

[axonjournal.com.au](http://axonjournal.com.au)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/300whdgiyx  
**Keywords:** essay, First Nations, Country,  
Haiku, culture, art, embodiment

# HAIKU AND COUNTRY

**The connect between First Nations Country and Bashō's  
enduring principles for the writing of Haiku**

Grant Caldwell

*University of Melbourne, ORCID: 0000-0002-1225-6500*

## **Abstract**

Examining the sense of embodiment in the art and culture of Australian First Nations and Country and how this is paralleled in the poetics and practice of writing haiku as it originated in Japan.



## HAIKU AND COUNTRY: THE CONNECT BETWEEN FIRST NATIONS COUNTRY AND BASHŌ'S ENDURING PRINCIPLES FOR THE WRITING OF HAIKU

Grant Caldwell

'The land is my backbone ...'

Galarrwuy Yunupingu

In 2019, I read the following passage in Dr Jessie Webb's doctoral thesis-in-progress that I was supervising (the thesis was completed in 2021):

It was never my intention to situate a project about place so far away from home. It always felt symptomatic of being Australian to look for answers, or whatever was felt to be lacking at home, elsewhere – to travel, to go to Europe, to look to and adopt foreign cultures and words and ways ... a way of deflecting the focus away from ourselves and what is happening in our own backyard ... (Webb n.d.: 64)

Webb's words had quite an impact on me and made me ask myself if this was what I had been doing in my study and practice of writing *haiku*. Had I been looking for 'answers, or whatever was felt to be lacking at home, elsewhere'? And if so, why?

I was first attracted to *haiku* by the poetry of the early Japanese masters in translation. These short poems captured a moment of existence, of real, tangible everyday existence in a moment that suggested deeper connections, the extent or knowledge of which was not always immediately apparent. They also seemed to align in essence with the tenets of Zen Buddhism and Daoism which have provided me with something akin to a philosophy, where Western philosophies and religions have not. The extraordinary fact that these poems connect with me and so many others across many centuries, from a different culture and through translation from a non-Germanic language, suggests an essential universality, that is a broadly consistent manner of seeing, whereby the way in which humans observe nature – human and natural – could be said to be, at base, universal and constant. Perhaps most pertinently these poems address the actual surrounds of the poet, in a concrete manner, where I feel that much of contemporary poetry (and art), and indeed religions and western philosophies, do not.

### Real existence of Country and embodied subjectivity

I will relate the practice of contemporary First Nations artist and scholar, Brian Martin, as an example of the attitude of Indigenous Australians, indeed an Indigenous Australian artist, to Country that relates to what I see as the basic enduring principles of the writing of *haiku* as observed by Bashō three hundred years ago. This examination of Martin's practice is not intended as a review or study of contemporary art in any way, but as a posited indicator of the connection.

Martin writes how contemporary art practice does not relate to the real world:

Much of contemporary art practice is divorced from the everyday or real world. For example, postmodern art may at times involve social critiques but it is primarily built on a negation of any grounded truths. (2013: 200)



Martin explains more particularly how his and other First Nations artistic practice is contrary to this postmodern approach, instead in fact being deeply rooted in the everyday or real world:

Indigenous cultural productions ... are founded in the real existence of country and not by an ephemeral relationship to an ideology needing to build over the top of nothingness, or in search of an elusive foundation. (2013: 203)

Matsuo Bashō likewise observed the need for poets to learn from the real world. Bashō saw the need for the poet to 'enter into' the objects they observe in order to understand them. His well-known instruction to 'learn about the pine from the pine' (Hass 1994: 233) represents this approach. The Japanese scholar Koji Kawamoto cites one of Bashō's devotees, Hattori Dohō (1657–1730), who recorded Bashō's advice to his devotees in explaining this dictum:

When he said 'learn', the Master meant that poets should compose their poems after having entered into their objects to discover and feel their deep and subtle essences. Even should one manage to put the object into words, if there are no feelings emerging naturally from the object itself, the object and the self form a duality, and the feeling will not be sincere. One will only have a fabricated meaning derived from personal intentions. (2000: 64)

Brian Martin expresses a similar approach to his art in taking the Indigenous view of Country as a living subject, not an object. He uses the term 'embodied subjectivity' in describing how his art practice is grounded in his own cultural understanding of reciprocal relationships to Country:

'Country' invokes an embodied subjectivity. In Indigenous terms, one 'belongs to country', not the reverse and there is a reciprocal relationship between people and 'country'. This also reveals a way of thinking in terms of a dynamic ontology that exists within Indigenous cultural ideology where this reciprocity is grounded in country. (2013: 185)

The relationship between Australian First Nations culture and Japanese *haiku* may not be remarkable as they are both looking for 'grounded truths' in the same place. Martin's term 'embodied subjectivity' could be said to be interchangeable with Bashō's 'entered into'. Kawamoto interprets Bashō as saying:

As the boundary between the one who sees and the object grows weak, the two are fused, and the division into subject and object becomes meaningless. This view of art stands in diametrical opposition to mimetic theory which, since the time of Aristotle, has called for the 'imitation' of reality. (2000: 65)

Here again this 'fusion' whereby 'the division into subject and object becomes meaningless', seems to equate directly with Martin's term 'embodied subjectivity'. The viewer/poet/artist 'becomes' the object, and in so doing 'feels' its essence. This view is immediate and contemporary but essentially informed by the tradition and history of the particular culture.

Bashō trained as a Zen monk and was strongly influenced by the Chinese Tang poets who in their turn were strongly influenced by Daoist principles. My understanding of Daoism is that it is based on universal principals of nature, in both human and natural phenomena, which could be seen as the basis of many traditional cultures. Dao means 'the Way'. I didn't have to think too hard about why I had not investigated Indigenous culture in this regard as Indigenous

culture was totally absent from my education all the way through to the completion of my university degree in 1970, and in the subsequent years it has occupied only a peripheral space in Australian mainstream culture. More pertinently, I'm ashamed to say that it has remained peripheral in my reading and attention until the last five to ten years. It may be too obvious to observe that we colonial descendants do not have cultural roots in this land, or our roots are somewhat shallow. It follows that the poetry of non-Indigenous poets may also lack in this way. It should be noted that some Indigenous poets may have a problem if they are writing in English, which many do. In her poem 'That Wadjela Tongue', Claire G Coleman (2020) laments the inadequacy of English to talk of her country:

They banned the speaking of language, made people  
Too scared to speak, frightened the breath from them. I cannot  
Speak the sacred words of country, I cannot speak to my love of  
My ancestors; the bones in the land, the land  
In my bones; in the language they understand.

My Country does not speak  
That Wadjela tongue.

Here, the inference is that the language is part of Country, is embedded in it and, in effect, comes from it. It is likely for this reason that many First Nations Australian poets write in their first language, partly or fully. Such First Nations poets as Lola McKickett, Nicole Smede, Adrian Webster, Kaitlen Wellington, and Melanie Mununggurr Williams do so, and by the language alone their poems suggest a sense of 'embodied subjectivity' and 'the real existence of country'.

### BALADJARANG

Adrian Webster

*Written in Gumea Dharawal, with interpretations by Jacob Morris and Joel Deaves. With gratitude to them and their families for holding, restoring and sharing the Gumea Dharawal Language.*

Naandthara cūndūlali ngia, naandtha ngiagaan  
Naandthara gūrabānlali ngia, naandtha ngiagaan  
Naandthara budjahlali ngia, naandtha ngiagaan  
Naandthara nudjūng ngia, naandtha ngiagaan  
Naandthara Ngurra ngia, naandtha ngiagaan  
Naandthara ngiagaan ngia, naadtha mugańndalaliang

I look at the trees, I see myself  
I look at the rocks, I see myself  
I look at the water, I see myself  
I look at the birds, I see myself  
I look at the country, I see myself  
I look at myself, I see my old people

(Webster 2020: 86–87)

Here the poet describes their direct ‘embodiment’ in the various natural phenomena of their Country, extending this to the cultural and familial history that the land and they inhabit, as one.

There are other First Nations poets such as Jeanine Leane, Bruce Pascoe, and Ryan Prehn who write wholly or predominantly in English but who seem to also manage to capture the sense of Country, or ‘embodied subjectivity’, such is their connection with the land. The following are excerpted sections of Jeanine Leane’s poem ‘River Memory (Prince Albert Bridge, Gundagai)’. I have selected the sections that most exemplify the sense of embodiment, both now and historically. Leane’s words convey the sense of the poet ‘becoming’ the river, ‘a deep archive’, and in her memory of the bridge she ‘becomes’ the little girl crossing it, crossing the colonial construct(ion) and its traffic. In the final few stanzas, the poet ‘looks back’, literally and metaphorically, ‘across the flood plain, that the reader might sense was *always* there, and at the now empty convent, another construct, actual and symbolic, of colonial bygones, reflected in the memory of their grandmother’s words:

### **Bridge over the River Memory**

#### *Prince Albert Bridge, Gundagai*

The water under the bridge ripples over  
my memory now. The bend of the  
Murrumbidgee—a deep archive—  
flows steady and slow.

I walk on the bridge and I remember how  
long it used to take to cross on my little  
legs clinging tight to the side rail as huge  
wheat and wool trucks thundered over the  
ancient planks laden with the wealth  
of the nation.

...

On the other side I look back across  
the flood plains. The old stone convent on  
the hill is empty.  
I come back after seeing the world.  
I hear my Grandmother again.  
The bridge is short now.  
But this history of place is still  
deep and long.

(Leane 2020: 135–136)

Of course, this recognition of real existence of Country in culture and art exists in most if not all traditional cultures worldwide. As an example, in their discussion of American First Nations poetry, the American scholar Karen Jackson Ford directly observes this notion of American First Nations sense of continued ‘fusion’ with their land as reflected in their writing of *haiku*. In

the below example, Ford cites American First Nations poet Gerald Vizenor's two haiku (in Ford 2009: 347, 345):

morning glories  
hold the old fence in line  
  
...  
  
november storm  
hearts painted on the bridge  
crossed out

These poems reflect how the poet is keenly absorbed in what they are observing and recording, indicating how they feel, culturally and historically, 'entering into' the morning glories, the old fence, the hearts on the bridge painted out. It is only on reflection we might unpack the inferences of these images. In the first poem, the morning glories are perhaps referring to nature, that is, Country, and how much stronger it is than human constructions, and how this nature innocently and ironically holds the symbol of ownership and containment of colonial establishment in place. In the second poem, Vizenor notes that in late autumn, when things are starting to die off, and perhaps in the naturally violent event of a storm, the painted hearts on the bridge have been physically crossed out, suggesting the erasure of emotional connection even on a colonial construction, let alone any natural phenomenon of Country. Recalling Bashō's words the feelings can be said to be 'sincere' because the poet has 'entered into their objects to discover and feel their deep and subtle essences'.

Ford quotes another American First Nations poet, William Oandasan, describing the 'inscape' of their spirit expressed in the landscapes of their homeland:

[William] Oandasan locates the 'springs of [his] existence' even further outside of the self, in nature, as we see in his epigraph to *Moving Inland*:

The inscape of my spirit is expressed in terms of the landscapes I call home and the earth I live on is my spiritual home: I the poet am the vortex of the inscape and landscape.

(in Ford 2009: 281–82)

The following is an example of Oandasan's poems that Ford cites:

in a chert arrowhead speckled with quartz  
I have seen our grandfathers

(Oandasan 1980: 8)

Here once more, through their subjective embodiment, the poet enters into the place and the thing they observe: in the chert arrowhead, the poet *sees* their grandfathers, as it represents their means of hunting and defence. In other words, their survival. In Kawamoto's terms 'the boundary between the one who sees, and the object grows weak, the two are fused, and the division into subject and object becomes meaningless'.

For First Nations people, it could be said that the 'subjective embodiment' of their knowledge of Country and culture means that in its presence, in relation to it, they no longer exist: they are it, they are 'fused' with it, and their ancestry is it. The history of Japanese poetry and its culture

has a similarly profound attitude to the observed land and objects of that land, of being what they observe. Indeed, a traditional principle of early *haiku* was a seasonal word or reference or *kigo* that placed the poem in a particular time of year, with all its cultural significances. The *kigo* is still part of the writing of *haiku*, in Japan and globally, but perhaps not as fundamental or required as it once was.

On a thatched roof  
it makes no sound at all –  
autumn rain

(Gusai, in Carter 2011: 26)

the deeper I go  
the deeper I go  
green mountains

(Santoka 2003: 22)

First snow  
falling  
on the half-finished bridge

Bashō (Hass 32)

A tethered horse,  
snow  
in both stirrups

Buson (Hass 124)

In all four poems the poets *become* what they observe, entering ‘into their objects to discover and feel their deep and subtle essences’.

This notion of embodiment in Australian First Nation’s culture and Country seems to be directly expressed by senior traditional owner of the MakMak clan, Kathy Deveraux, talking about her country, the Wagait:

IT’S LIKE THE SPIDER:  
A LOT OF THINGS TIE IN TOGETHER,  
SO WHEN YOU ASK ONE THING  
YOU GET A WHOLE BIG HISTORY

(in Bird Rose 2009: 57)

This could almost be a description of what traditional *haiku* is for Japanese people, how the language and the objects or beings or areas described not only connect but contain deep cultural and historical knowledge: they ‘tie in together’.

Many Western poets and artists could be seen to have actioned this kind of immersion or embodiment, to greater or lesser success. Many of the impressionists and post-impressionists such as Cézanne and Van Gogh painted *en plein air* or in front of the actual landscape they were painting. That is, as Martin puts it, ‘founded in the real existence of country and not by an ephemeral relationship to an ideology needing to build over the top of nothingness, or in search of an elusive foundation’ (2013: 203). The Australian landscape artist Fred Williams seems to have learned this in the development of his art. Williams travelled at various times to Europe, Japan and China, where he continued to work on his art, but he always returned to Victoria, and in 1977 he said:

I will never paint anywhere but in Australia because I know Australia ... It would be impossible for me to paint anywhere else. I must be inside looking out – not outside looking in. (in Hart 2011: 157)

Note the connection here with Oandasan’s declaration of being: ‘I the poet am the vortex of the inscape and landscape’.

Williams’ statement suggests the same ‘embodied subjectivity’ Martin (and Oandasan) refers to, whereby the artist *becomes* the object, ‘inside looking out’, that is, from the object, without the usual sense of subjectivity or ‘outside looking in’ at the object. By becoming the object there is no subjectivity *or* objectivity because the artist or poet *is* the object. Bashō expressed a similar notion in one of his recorded dialogues:

‘The problem with most poems is that they are either subjective or objective’. ‘Don’t you mean too subjective or objective?’ his student asked; the teacher clarified, simply, ‘No.’ (in Hirshfield 2002: n.p.)

Or in Kawamoto’s interpretation of Bashō: ‘the two are fused, and the division into subject and object becomes meaningless’ (2000: 65).

In an interview in 1981, a year before his death, Williams said, ‘I sort of take the attitude that I’m like an antenna. I let it come to me ... I certainly don’t try to impose anything on it’ (Hart 2011: 199). Here again, this suggests that in order to become and thereby feel the landscape he needs to passively observe it until he is absorbed in or by it.

In discussing her photo-essay book *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland* (2002), Deborah Bird Rose writes that she treated ‘place as a conscious entity with agency’ and started by ‘engaging with a sentient landscape’. And that: ‘Such an approach destabilises the whole system of subject-object dichotomies on which the conventional western knowledge system depends’ (2009: 57).

Here again is the suggestion of unsettling the presumption of the subject-object binary, and instead seeing the practice of the artist/poet as becoming one with the observed object. Bird Rose’s view seems to accord with those of Brian Martin and Bashō and the traditional haiku poets. Bird Rose adds further support to this thesis, adding that in her book she sought ‘to communicate something of the quality of relationships between and among specific embodied people, animals, plants and places’ (2009: 56).

### Place: here and now

To be immersed in country and culture seems to already suggest the here and now, the immediate, the present. In his article ‘Beyond the haiku moment: Basho, Buson and modern

haiku myths', American scholar Haruo Shirane uses Bashō's concept of 'the "unchanging and the ever-changing" (*fueki ryūkō*)', to suggest that the *haiku* poet must write along two key axes: the vertical axis that acknowledges previous literary traditions and cultural memories ('the unchanging' or *fueki*) and the horizontal axis that acknowledges the now, the contemporary, everyday life ('the ever-changing' or *ryūkō*) (2000: n.p.).

Interpreting this principle in First Nations culture we might see the unchanging as the spirit of Country and the people's attitude to it, and the ever-changing as the people's adaption to whatever changes occur in Country and people. Some of the poems of First Nations people cited above reflect this latter 'axis', referring to such changes that acknowledge the ever-changing of nature, human and natural. The sense of the unchanging is also discernible in these poems in their reflected attitude to Country in which they are embodied.

This sense of *ryūkō* or 'the ever-changing' emphasises the need to capture the present feeling or occurrence: being in the present. Through her study of Indigenous culture, Bird Rose seems to accord with Bashō in her call for scholars to unsettle their sense of permanence in order to embrace the movement and change that is occurring *now*, in this place:

Our task as scholars, as I see it, is to pay serious and critical attention to the world as it is becoming, and such attention will necessarily require us to destabilise our given knowledge. Knowledge that looks for structure and permanence must be destabilised in favour of theories of knowledge that work with relationships and motion. Place provides exactly a nexus of analysis that calls for study of relationships and motion. (2009: 52)

It seems reasonable to say that Bashō, like Bird Rose, understood that to study place, or to study what one is at that moment observing, is to study the act of change, of 'relationships and motion', and to attempt to *capture* this in words. But this is not to forget the principle of the unchanging that Bashō also determined as essential for the attitude to the observed and the writing of *haiku* just as First Nations people can never forget the unchanging spirit of Country. Here we see again a nexus of First Nations culture and the principles of *haiku*, whereby each parallels the other.

### Some contemporary Australian *haiku*

I will include here a selection of *haiku* from the recently published *under the same moon: Fourth Australian Haiku Anthology*, edited by Lyn Reeves, Vanessa Proctor and Rob Scott (2023). These poems by Australian poets could be said to reflect the sense of embodiment, 'having entered into their objects to discover and feel their deep and subtle essences'.

campground  
the yellow squares of grass  
where summer was

(Jan Dobb, in Reeves et al. 2023: 24)

Here the poet's focal attention is a nostalgic representation of the end of holidays, probably near a beach, whereby the poet 'enters into' or is one with, the yellow square of grass, a faded, infertile patch representing the fact that the freedom and fun, or 'life', of the holidays is now finished.



walking straight past my masked friend

(Matt Hetherington, in Reeves et al. 2023: 47)

Hetherington's *haiku* often highlight the bizarre and macabre, notably in Australian contexts. Here, the theme is universal, and the poet's gaze is a laconic irony on Covid where the poet is 'present' in the poem, but his focus is absorbed in the moment that almost misses acknowledging a friend.

silent night the fridge hum changes pitch

(Chris Lynch, in Reeves et al. 2023: 64)

Here the poet demonstrates total awareness or absorption in the moment and the observed fridge, aided by the silence of the night. As a result, the fridge becomes an almost sentient, living thing that the poet becomes absorbed by as its sound changes. This is a good example of *haiku* that connects with senses other than sight.

urban flood  
the old creek  
traces its ancestry

(Carol Reynolds, in Reeves et al. 2023: 94)

Here Reynolds feels for or 'becomes' or embodies the new creek that has risen where the old creek did not, except for its dry track, after a recent urban flood. The poet empathises with the ancestry of the creek bed that now becomes manifest, in a sense revived, in the flood. The dual senses of the unchanging and the ever-changing are evident in the ancestry of the old creek and the recent newly created flow. Of speculative interest, and without intending criticism of Reynolds, I note their use of the word 'ancestry' for the old creek, whereas in the earlier cited poem, the First Nations poet Jeanine Leane refers to the 'deep archive' of the Murrumbidgee. For the non-Indigenous poet, Reynolds, the creek correctly represents ancestry or history, whereas for the First nations poet, Leane, the river is an archive of their culture, flowing 'steady and slow'. Reynolds senses the history of the place, whereas Leane knows its culture.

bushfire  
flaming leaves fly  
from tree to tree

banksia  
all the shades  
of dying

(Quendryth Young, in Reeves et al. 2023: 130)

In both poems Young laments the vulnerability and ephemerality of nature. We can sense their feel for the flaming leaves and the trees and the dying banksia, how in their keen observation they are no longer existent but immersed in these phenomena. Peculiar Australian themes are prominent here.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the ongoing development of the writing of *haiku* or its ‘migrated’ form, in Australia and elsewhere, may be seen to incorporate the same sense of embeddedness or ‘subjective embodiment’ learned over tens of thousands of years by Indigenous cultures. In this way, in today’s ‘mobile planet’ when so many people from various races and nationalities take up residence in new lands, the principles of *haiku* and indeed First Nations culture may be invaluable in aiding the capture of what it is to be in Country and in respecting that country. There may be universal themes that can be applied from these extant cultures and cultural forms, which can be of significant help in the new and changing world of mobility and climate change. These universal themes might encourage a more understanding, empathetic and caring rather than exploitative approach or attitude to the land, in business, agriculture and cultural awareness. There already exist such notions and preliminary activities in Australia and elsewhere, through the acknowledgment of First Nations traditional ways, along with considerations of sustainability and long-term strategies. But I would suggest that there is never a limit to the need and potential for this.

### Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the Traditional First Nation custodians of the unceded land where I live and work, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, and pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr Jessie Webb for her research into First Nations Australian culture and art, which led me to speculate on a relationship between First Nations culture and its connection with the enduring principles of *haiku*. I also thank Dr Webb for permitting me to use parts of their research, that relating to Brian Martin and Deborah Bird Rose, which I utilised in this essay.

### Works cited

- Carter, SD 2011 *Haiku before Haiku*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Coleman, CJ 2020 That Wadjela tongue, *Australian Book Review* 418 (January–February), <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2020/january-february-2020-no-418/710-january-february-2020-no-418/6143-2020-peter-porter-poetry-prize-shortlist>
- Ford, KJ 2009 Marking time in Native America: Haiku, elegy, survival, *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 81.2: 333–59
- Hart, D 2011 *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia
- Hass, R 1994 *The Essential Haiku – Versions of Bashō, Buson, and Issa*, New York: Ecco Press
- Hirshfield, J 2002 Basho as teacher, *Tricycle – The Buddhist Review* (Spring), <https://tricycle.org/magazine/basho-teacher/>
- Kawamoto, K 2000 *The Poetics of Japanese Verse: Imagery, Structure, Meter*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press
- Leane, J 2020 *Guwayu—For All Times*, Broome: Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation
- Martin, B 2013 Immaterial land, in E Barrett and B Bolt (eds.), *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a ‘New Materialism’ through the Arts*, London: IB Tauris, 185–204
- Oandasan, W 1980 *A Branch of California Redwood*, Los Angeles: University of California Press

Reeves, L, V Proctor, & R Scott 2023 *under the same moon: Fourth Australian Haiku Anthology* Hobart, TAS: Forty South Publishing

Rose, DB 2002 *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press

Rose, DB 2009 Writing Place, in A Curthoys and A McGrath (eds.), *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration*, Clayton, VIC: Monash University Press, 52–59

Santoka, T 2003 *For All My Walking: Free-verse Haiku of Taneda Santōka with Excerpts from His Diaries* (trans Burton Watson), New York: Columbia University Press

Shirane, H 2000 Beyond the haiku moment: Basho, Buson and modern haiku myths, *Modern Haiku* XXXI:1 (winter-spring), [http://www.haikupoet.com/definitions/beyond\\_the\\_haiku\\_moment.html](http://www.haikupoet.com/definitions/beyond_the_haiku_moment.html) (accessed 13 December 2022)

Webb, J C 2021 *Being in Place: Reimagining Relationships with History, Place and People* (doctoral thesis), The University of Melbourne

Webster, A 2020 BALADJARANG, in Jeanine Leane (ed.), *Guwayu – For All Times*, Broome, WA: Magabala Books

---

### About the author

Dr Grant Caldwell is a novelist, poet and scholar. He is a Senior Lecturer in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Melbourne.

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/nq2qgq918w  
**Keywords:** essay, scansion, metre, rhythm,  
dactyls, poetry, prosody, creative-critical

# STRESSED? UNSTRESSED? ATTENTIVENESS TO METRE

## A journey towards intentional practice

Miriam Wei Wei Lo

*Sheridan Institute of Higher Education, ORCID: 0000-0002-3224-5905*

### Abstract

How do you scan a line of poetry? This creative-critical essay explores the faultlines opened up by this simple, but dangerous, question from the perspective of a poetry-writing practice and pedagogy. It argues for a distinction between metre and rhythm, then proposes that quarrels over scansion often come down to different assumptions about which metrical system is in use. The paper demonstrates this by examining the contradictory positions of canonical heavyweights Robert Hass and Gerard Manley Hopkins on the matter of the dactylic foot. This paper goes on to outline a few challenges and strategies in teaching poetic metre to beginner poets. It considers the difficult task of discerning what 'sounds right' in a poem, using Annie Finch's theories of metre and meaning to prompt reflective questions for the practicing poet. While an app or digital tool that could scan oral readings of poetry would be useful (both for pedagogy and practice), this essay contends that attentiveness to metre and rhythm is primarily a discipline of the body.

## STRESSED? UNSTRESSED? ATTENTIVENESS TO METRE: A JOURNEY TOWARDS INTENTIONAL PRACTICE

Miriam Wei Wei Lo

### Introduction (by way of argument)

This essay begins with a fight. How to describe this poet's quarrel, the fiercest argument I have ever had with another poet? It was over how to scan a line of poetry. I cannot remember what or whose line of poetry it was. I do remember that we could not agree on how to divide the line into feet. *She* thought all the feet should have the same number of syllables. I begged to differ.

Neither could we find complete agreement on where to place the stresses. The other poet, a fellow creative writing PhD candidate, held up her hands.

'Can you *see* me?' she said.

'Do you know *why* I am shaking?'

I remained silent.

'I am shaking because I am *angry*!'

I continued in my silence. There did not seem to be much point in speaking. In my head, however, I thought, *Well, you can be as angry as you like, but that doesn't make you right.*

I was still young enough to believe that I was always right.

Years later, I ask myself why this still matters. In this heyday of the prose poem, with its 'uninhibited' rhythms (as Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton describe them, 2020: 73), so complex and variable in their form and effects, why should we care about scansion, or its inevitable companion, metre?

What is more, there is a lot of confusion around metre. Most of us understand that metre involves finding patterns and that there are things we should count, *but what is it, exactly, that we are meant to count?* Syllables? Stresses? Or both? Add to that the use of Greek for naming feet,<sup>1</sup> not to mention the challenges of translating Greek quantitative metre into English (which is an accentual-stress language),<sup>2</sup> as well as the clash between Greek and Old English ideas about metre,<sup>3</sup> as well as any number of websites with contradictory advice ... and it all begins to look impossible.

It is tempting not to bother, if not for the troubling awareness that control over rhythm is part of the power of poetry, and that control over rhythm requires at least some understanding of metre. As Frances Stillman puts it, in her mid 20th-century poetry manual, 'In the living individual, the pulse of the heartbeat, though seldom consciously thought of, pervades the entire being. It would seem, in fact, that all the natural, nonvolitional motions of life and matter are characterized by rhythm' (1966: 3). If there is something inescapable about rhythm, and by extension, metre, it might be worth the effort of growing in our consciousness of how it works. Going further, Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper remind us that 'the job of poetry is to make a music of language' (2003: 11) and part of that music is the way its rhythms beat.

Furthermore, as Hetherington and Atherton show, even the prose poem 'is ghosted by metre ... as it insists on its prosaic nature, and its mixed rhythms create the kinds of prose-poetical

effects that lift the writing away from the narrative-driven features of conventional prose' (2020: 56).<sup>4</sup>

### Coming to terms: Definitions

We will begin by separating 'metre' from 'rhythm'. Reference texts as influential as *The Poetry Foundation* and the online *Britannica* define rhythm and metre in almost identical manners.<sup>5</sup> This is unhelpful and means that these terms often end up being used interchangeably, particularly outside very specific academic circles. There was a time, perhaps even as late as the mid 20th century, when a clear distinction between rhythm and metre was common knowledge in broader poetry circles.<sup>6</sup> I offer these working definitions on the premise that this knowledge can no longer be assumed.

I define **metre** as the **fixed patterns** of either stress, syllable count, or both, that can be used to organise poetry, particularly at the level of the line.<sup>7</sup>

American literary critic Paul Fussell (1966) helpfully identifies four metrical systems, of which three are worth mentioning:<sup>8</sup>

- 1 **The syllabic:** This is the pattern system where lines are organised by syllable count (e.g. the 5-7-5 of the haiku).
- 2 **The accentual:** This is the pattern system where lines are organised by counting stressed syllables only (e.g. the Old English alliterative line, as used in *Beowulf*, which is organised around four stresses, with little regard for the number of unstressed syllables in between stressed ones).
- 3 **The accentual-syllabic:** This is the pattern system where lines are organised by counting BOTH the number of stressed syllables AND number of unstressed syllables. The positioning of the stressed syllable also matters. The accentual-syllabic metrical system is where the translation of Greek quantitative metre into English language poetry lands.

The accentual-syllabic system gives us the four most common poetic feet:<sup>9</sup>

\ x

The trochee: | **Faster** | (two syllables in length, with the stress on the first syllable)

x \

The iamb: | To **be** | (two syllables in length, with the stress on the second syllable)

\ x x

The dactyl: | **Trickery** | (three syllables in length, with the stress on the first syllable)

x x \

The anapest: | Can you **see** | (three syllables in length, with the stress on the third syllable)

By extension, poetry's most well-known accentual-syllabic pattern: the iambic pentameter (a line composed of five iambic feet):

x \   x \   x \   x \   x \  
| Shall I | compare | thee to | a sum | mer's day? |

Rhythm, however, in poetry consists of more than simply the fixed patterns of metre. McAuley usefully defines rhythm as ‘movement’: ‘as determined by metre, stress, pauses, pace’ (1966: 58). Attridge and Carper discuss rhythm in terms of both its adhesion to metric patterns and its departures from the patterns, which can be used, by skilful practitioners, to create significant effects (2003: 4). Building on this work, I define **rhythm** as **poetry’s relationship with metre** that shows itself in the unique configuration of stressed syllables, unstressed syllables, pauses, and pace produced by each reading of a poem. Rhythm’s relationship with Metre can be straightforward, or it can be really messy. Sometimes Rhythm sticks to Metre’s patterns, sometimes Rhythm likes to disrupt expectations (there is nothing like conforming for a while ... and then rebelling wildly). The party gets even more out of hand when the stress-patterns of standard English are disrupted by the variant stress-patterns of diverse englishes.<sup>10</sup>

As I shall now demonstrate, quarrels about scansion often come down to which metrical system (or method of patterning) is assumed to be in use.

### Aftershocks

Twenty-three years after my poets’ quarrel over scansion, the quarrel that marked an uneasy awareness that there might be more ways of scanning a line than the one I had grown up with, I was reading American poet Robert Hass (*A little book on form*) to improve my understanding of poetry.

Towards the end of this book (which is only ‘little’ in the way that an elephant might be when compared to a blue whale) there is a chapter on scansion. I read this chapter with a growing sense of horror that rapidly developed into complete outrage:

Contrary to what you might read in some manuals of prosody, there are kinds of substitutions that don’t occur in iambic verse. There are no pyrrhic feet ... There are no dactylic feet. A three-syllable pattern of stressed-unstressed-unstressed doesn’t exist in English because the rising rhythm will always assimilate the third weak syllable to the next stressed syllable rather than to the previous one. (Hass 2017: 403)

*What!?! I thought, putting the book down, then picking it up and reading it again with disbelief. No dactylic feet!?!*

Hass goes on, in the pages following this outrageous assertion, to illustrate what he means. He uses Robert Frost’s poem ‘The Oven Bird’, which begins, uncontroversially, in iambic pentameter:

x / x / x / x / x /  
There is| a **sing**|er **ev**ery **one**| has **heard**|

According to Hass, the following two scansions of the second line of ‘The Oven Bird’ are allowable:

/ x / / x / [x] / x /  
| **Loud**, a | **mid-sum**| mer **and**| a **mid-**| **wood bird**.<sup>11</sup> (2017: 406)  
(note the second and fifth foot, both spondees)

or



/ x / x x / x / x /  
 | **Loud**, a | **mid**-sum| mer **and**| a **mid**-| wood **bird**.| (2017: 406)  
 (note the the second and fifth foot, now a trochee and an iamb, respectively)

My instinct is to scan in the following manner:

/ x / x x / x / x / v  
 | **Loud**, a | **mid**-summer| **and** a| **mid**-wood| **bird**. |<sup>12</sup>  
 (note the second foot, a scandalous dactyl, a substitution that Hass would frown upon)

Where, I wondered, did this supposedly deplorable tendency towards dactylic substitution come from?

I had a hunch that answers would come from across the Atlantic.

Gerard Manley Hopkins did not disappoint:

... for purposes of scanning it is a great convenience to follow the example of music and take the stress always first, as the accent or the chief accent always comes first in a musical bar. If this is done there will be in common English verse only two possible feet – the so-called accentual Trochee and Dactyl ... (1918/1985: 7–8)

I can almost hear Hopkins saying: *There are no iambic feet. There are no anapestic feet.*

Hopkins's sprung rhythm is a departure from the accentual-syllabic metrical system back towards the Old English accentual metrical system (where only stressed syllables are counted, with little regard paid to the number of unstressed syllables), but his insistence that each foot ought to begin with a stressed syllable is unique to sprung rhythm and is not standard for accentual metrics.<sup>13</sup> Some of Hopkins's sonnets ('The Soldier', for example, or more famously, 'The Windhover') have lines with far more than five stresses, so he was clearly unconcerned, at times, with paying attention even to accentual patterns. Other sonnets, however (42 though to 46, for example), follow a pattern of five stresses per line much more closely. The relationship of Hopkins's rhythm to metre is clearly in the 'messy' category.

Hass prefers a tidier relationship between rhythm and metre in his method of scansion. He seems to assume an unusually strict approach within the accentual-syllabic metrical system that only allows for feet that are two syllables long. Hopkins' method of scansion is different: he prefers to count stresses only, and there are times when he abandons counting altogether.

When I consider these differences, the puzzle of my own poet's quarrel begins to resolve. The poet I quarrelled with was deeply influenced by Hass. She must have assumed the accentual-syllabic metrical system had to be used (perhaps with Hass' strict adherence to two-syllable feet). I was much more influenced by Hopkins and preferred an accentual metrical system, with mixed feet, rather than the accentual-syllabic one. I was messy. She was tidy. We were using different metrical systems.

### Beyond systems: Questions and practice

It is Hass, ironically, who gives us a way beyond systems, with this concession: 'The point is not to be right; the point is to listen and to train your ear into the deepest textures of the sound of a poem' (Hass 2017: 406; emphasis in original).

How do we do this? How do we encourage this listening? How do we train ears, both our own and those of others, 'into the deepest textures of the sound of a poem'? These are the questions I take with me into the classroom, particularly as I attempt to gauge the level of awareness that beginner poets have of any metrical system at all. Many writers I work with, even those who speak English as a first language, struggle to hear the stresses in spoken English.<sup>14</sup>

To develop attentiveness both to metre and rhythm, there is much to be said for reading poetry out loud. I suspect this is as true for a beginning poet as it is for a poet whose work is emerging or established. Reading poetry out loud trains the ear to hear where stresses fall and to hear what patterns might be in use. This can be done with one's own poetry as well as with poetry written by others. Attridge and Carper's system of beat prosody, which initially dispenses with the counting of feet in favour of training the ear to hear stressed syllables, can be very useful at this point.

However, as even Attridge and Carper observe, there is something to be said for learning the accentual-syllabic metrical system: 'those Greek words have been in use for a long time in discussions of poetry, and as labels [...] they can be a useful shorthand for describing particular sorts of meters' (2003: 87). It does take some effort, but in my personal teaching practice, I find it is useful to train more advanced poets to count stresses and syllables and to recognise the four most common metrical feet: iambs, trochees, anapests, and dactyls. They are easier to find in traditional verse forms, but even prose poems can yield long stretches of iambs.

In my personal poetry writing practice, I find it helpful to scan my own work, usually in the later stages of drafting, and especially if a line doesn't seem to 'sound right'. As I prefer the accentual metric system, I tend towards simply counting the number of stresses, though I may choose to use the accentual-syllabic system, especially if I am using a form that traditionally requires accentual-syllabic feet (e.g. the sonnet). I cannot completely control how others will scan my poems; however, there are things I can do, as Canadian poet Susan Glickman says, 'to make sure the written score is easy to interpret' (2022: 29). One of these things I can do is to mark the stresses on any problematic line and to think about whether I am happy with how it sounds. However, as I have discovered in writing this paper, the question of whether something sounds 'right' can be heavily loaded.

### Does this sound right?

Any answer one might give to this seemingly innocent question really depends on how one defines 'right'. Many of us go by 'gut-feel' on this. However, to extend this analogy, what we have in our guts really depends on what we have ingested.<sup>15</sup> We may be working from different metrical systems. We are almost certainly working from unique poetry reading histories.

In *The ghost of meter*, American poet Annie Finch summarises the three main theories of metre and meaning up to the turn of the 21st century:<sup>16</sup>

**Propriety Theory:** 'the idea that certain meters inherently suit certain poetic themes or genres' (Finch 2000: 3).

This comes from the Classic tradition (i.e. the ancient Greeks and Romans) and it may seem counterintuitive to contemporary poets. However, a strong argument can be made in the case of the limerick, where the metric patterns seem to be an integral part of the humour:

O **C**ovid,	you **f**inal	ly **g**ot me!
**J**ust when	I **t**hought I'd	reached **s**afety.
As I **s**hiv	ered and **c**oughed,	
My **o**nline	presence **t**rouged,	
And **n**ow I'm	a **N**etflix	devotee ...

(Lo 2022)<sup>17</sup>

In this instance, lines 1, 2, and 5 are in (largely) amphibrachic trimeter (a less common pattern) and lines 3 and 4 are in anapestic dimeter. The rolling sound of these metric patterns contributes to the comic effect.

**Iconic Theory:** 'the idea that meter can reinforce a poem's meaning at particular points by adding expressive sound effects or by emphasizing particular words' (Finch 2000: 3). For example:

I **o**p	en the **p**an	try **d**oor
and **f**ind,	to **m**y	surprise
that the **ch**il	dren have **l**eft	
**t**hree	**s**quares of	**ch**ocolate

(from Lo, 'Late Harvest Semillon', 2014)

The opening two lines establish an iambic trimeter as the dominant metre, so when we come to line 3, the change to anapestic dimeter slows us down (and creates a feeling of suspense – what *have* the children left?), with the spondee and trochee opening of line 4 emphasising the 'three squares'.

**Frame Theory:** 'the idea that a meter constitutes a meaningful 'contract' with the reader by evoking prior poems in the same meter' (Finch 2000: 3). For example:

|**S**even| fifteen. | The **s**and | is **w**hite | as **s**now. |

(from Lo, 'Quick Trip to the Beach Before the Early Service', 2023)

Apart from the opening trochee, the rest of the opening line of this sonnet is in iambs, making it (largely) iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter evokes the English literary canon (particularly the Elizabethan period: an apogee of sonnet-making) – establishing a contract with the reader that (somehow) this poem will be in conversation with this tradition.

Finch then goes on to propose her own **Metrical Code Theory**, which 'concentrates on meter as a cultural artifact that evokes previous literary associations and relates a poem to a poetic lineage' (Finch 2000: 11–12). She argues that careful, line-by-line analysis of poetic metre can 'shed light' on 'the essence and *raison d'être* of poetry: the mysterious connections between speech patterns, the body's memory of rhythm, and the individual and cultural unconscious' (Finch 2000: 12).

One of the questions Finch's work provokes is whether particular metres, such as iambic pentameter, can be tools of oppression. Finch certainly makes a strong case for an association between iambic pentameter and oppressive patriarchy in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, as does Antony Easthope in relation to iambic pentameter and the oppressive bourgeoisie, and also Carolyn Cooper and Maude Dikobe in relation to iambic pentameter and colonial oppression.<sup>18</sup>

While iambic pentameter can and certainly has been used as a tool of cultural oppression, I hesitate to land on an absolute causal connection between use of iambic pentameter and oppressive behaviour: it is too crudely reductive on a number of fronts. While control of the means of production affects every instance of poetry, every instance of poetry equally exceeds control of the means of production. Art cannot be reduced to Power. From the point of view of a personal poetic practice, I want to hold open the door for conversation with tradition. Subversion, for example, is meaningless unless there is something to subvert. In my poem 'Quick Trip to the Beach Before the Early Service', quoted earlier, the use of iambic pentameter in the first line sets up English cultural expectations about Christmas (cold, for example, instead of hot; snow instead of sand), which I then go on to subvert. I need iambic pentameter to do this. There are also cases to be made for appropriation and rehabilitation, which I shall not expand on here. Nevertheless, the questions Finch (and others) raise about metre are still worth considering. In the spirit of a thoughtful attentiveness to metre (as part of a larger attentiveness to poetic rhythm), poets could use theories of metre and meaning as prompts to ask themselves the following questions as they write:

In relation to...	Questions to ask:
Propriety theory	Do I want to use a traditional metre-and-theme pairing? Why or why not?
Iconic theory	Am I using metre or disruptions to metre to make a point? Does it work? Am I convinced?
Frame theory	What other poems use metre in the way I am using it here? Do I want to evoke these poems? Why or why not?
Metrical code theory	Are there any sub- or un-conscious individual or cultural patterns that this metre is connected to? Is this something I am comfortable with? Why or why not?

As I read poetry (both my own and that of others) and ask myself if it 'sounds right', something else I am conscious of, is the profound effect that variations in English can have on stress. If you listen to Alvin Pang read his Singlish poem 'Candles' [here](#), you may notice that, in Singlish, the tonal patterns of Mandarin Chinese go some way towards displacing the stress-accentual patterns of Standard English. The metric implications of this displacement are significant and deserve further study.<sup>19</sup>

### Is there an app for that?

Can the reader imagine a recording app that could scan poetry for us? In my mind, this app could turn an oral reading of a poem into a visual script. This app could mark the stresses and pauses of our reading. It could be programmed to use different metrical systems (e.g. the syllabic option would just count syllables per line; the accentual would just count number of stresses per line, etc.). Perhaps it could even use a form of aural artificial intelligence to suggest alternative line-rhythms, though this would require thought about authorship and to what extent use of the app would need to be acknowledged.

No app like this exists. Yet. In 2018 Singapore-based academic Setsuko Yokoyama test-drove digital technologies for exploring prosody available at the time and came to this conclusion: 'To the best of my knowledge, I have not yet come across projects that specifically concern accentual meters or syllabic meters, and would like to know if there are any such efforts'

(2018). In late November 2022 I tried out all the projects listed by Yokoyama, including PRAAT, Scandroid, For Better For Verse, Poemage, and Machine-Aided Close Listening. None of them could effectively detect stress (though Machine-Aided Close Listening could detect changes in pitch, which has some correlation with stress). Many of them probably required a linguistics PhD to interpret the results.

With all the hype around ChatGPT, one might be tempted to think that developments in artificial intelligence might speed up the development of a poetry scansion app. However, I tested ChatGPT on its poetry scansion capacity in May 2023 and have concluded that it cannot currently scan poetry. It cannot even count syllables correctly.<sup>20</sup>

While an app would be a handy aid for learning, especially for digitally literate future generations, I see it as a supplement to traditional metric and rhythmic pedagogy, not a replacement. Attentiveness to metre and rhythm is primarily a discipline of the body. It requires poetry to be felt in the mouth, for words to be articulated in the throat and by the tongue. It requires poetry to be received by the ear, for words to land upon our eardrums in their waves of sound before they are interpreted by our brains.

It is true that the presence of different metrical systems for English-language poetry can make scansion confusing. It is also true that big-name poets can give contradictory advice about dactylic feet (among other things). However, learning these things gives us a way into poetry, both as readers and as writers. When conflicts arise, it helps to remember that poetic practice is always more than the sum of poetry's rules.<sup>21</sup>

To write a poem is to trust that part of the power of poetry is its capacity to create a relationship with metre, whether this relationship is messy or straightforward. By paying attention to metrical systems and to the way that poetry's rhythms dance both *with* patterns and *away* from patterns, poets can grow in consciousness of the things we intuitively enact with our words and voices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a quick and witty survey of these Greek names, I refer the reader to ST Coleridge's 'Metrical Feet' (see <https://allpoetry.com/Metrical-Feet>).

<sup>2</sup> As Kendall Dunkelberg points out, 'Greek worked with a quantitative meter, meaning that the differences in syllables were actually heard in the length of the syllable, not the stress. Some Romance languages are still more like that today, but English, being a Germanic language, uses accent or stress for meter, since there is more difference in stress than there is in length' (2017: 119). With respect to Latin poetry (which largely imitates the Greek in terms of metre), Antony Easthope argues that English metre is only ever an approximation of Latin metre, as syllable length does not translate directly into relative stress (1983: 63).

<sup>3</sup> This clash largely has to do with whether or not unstressed syllables need to be counted. For further discussion of Old and Middle English prosody, and its differences from classical Greek prosody, see *The Norton Anthology of English Literature's* volume on the Middle Ages, pages

24–25. For more in-depth discussions of this well-researched field, see any translation of The Venerable Bede's *De Arte Metrica* as well as any contemporary books or journal articles in the area of Old English metrical studies.

<sup>4</sup> Hetherington and Atherton inadvertently echo Annie Finch's ghostly metaphor of metre haunting contemporary forms of poetry.

<sup>5</sup> These terms are often used interchangeably because they are regularly defined in a similar manner. Take, for example, the *Poetry Foundation* website's definition of rhythm: an 'audible pattern in verse established by the intervals between stressed syllables' (2023). This is functionally identical to this dictionary definition of 'metre' from the online *Britannica*, 'the rhythmic pattern of a poetic line' (1998).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Australian poet James McAuley's differentiations in *A Primer of English Versification* (1966). In the same year, American Frances Stillman writes: 'Within the general concept of rhythm in poetry, meter is, as we have already seen, the name of the regular system of the alternation of accented and unaccented syllables in English and of long and short syllables in the classical languages' (1966: 4).

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to McAuley's helpful distinctions between metre as 'the scheme on which the syllabic row is organized' (1966: 1) and rhythm as 'a general term for the movement of verse as determined by metre, stress, pauses, pace' (1966: 58).

<sup>8</sup> The fourth metrical system Fussell describes is quantitative, 'which measures durational rather than accentual feet' (1966: 11); however, as he goes on to demonstrate, it is fairly pointless trying to write in quantitative feet in a language like English which is so heavily accentual. Note also that the metrical systems described here use Fussell's terminology, but the definitions are in my own words and the examples and elaborations are my own.

<sup>9</sup> In this essay, I use '˘' to indicate a stressed syllable and 'x' to indicate an unstressed syllable; 'v' indicates a missing beat or pause after an end-stopped line (some would use a caesura || here instead). '|' is used within the line to mark metric feet. I have also put the stressed syllables in bold typeface. While I agree that Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper's system of beat prosody (which uses 'B/b' for stressed syllables, which he calls beats, and variations of 'o' for unstressed syllables, which he calls offbeats) is easier for the beginner to grasp, I revert to an older system of scansion here because I want to mark out the feet. As Attridge and Carper observe in relation to feet: 'those Greek words have been in use for a long time in discussions of poetry, and as labels ... they can be a useful shorthand for describing particular sorts of meters' (2003: 87).

<sup>10</sup> The use of a de-capitalised 'english' here is deliberate and used to alert the reader to the differences between Standard English and various english dialects (of which Australian slang or vernacular is one). Kel Richards helpfully defines Standard English as 'the kind of English that all users of different English dialects employ when communicating formally with each other in their best business suits' (2015: 2). I have adapted his 'Englishes' (2015: ff) to 'englishes' to draw attention to the complex power struggles, both cultural and linguistic, that are the legacy of British colonisation. Standard English, an accentual-stress language, offers a particular range of rhythmic choices to the poet. Various english dialects offer different rhythmic choices to the poet, especially when the influence of other languages changes the stress patterns of words (e.g. Hindi in Hinglish and Mandarin Chinese in Singlish).

<sup>11</sup> Hass does not mark the ‘a’ in the fourth foot of this line from ‘The Oven-Bird’. I have inserted a mark to indicate ‘unstressed’.

<sup>12</sup> ‘v’ stands for a missing beat. One could equally indicate the missing beat with a caesura ‘||’.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the concise summary of Old and Middle English prosody by James Simpson and Alfred David in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* pages 24–25. There is no concern with the division of lines into feet, so one must assume that it is, ironically, the influence of the accentual-syllabic system that prompts Hopkins towards dividing lines into feet, instead of simply counting the accentual stresses.

<sup>14</sup> This anecdotal experience has largely been gained in the last five years, teaching creative writing to undergraduates at Sheridan Institute of Higher Education in Perth, Western Australia; although giving informal poetry workshops as an adult volunteer in my children’s primary-school classes has also informed my pedagogical experience. For writers who are really struggling to identify stresses, Renee M LaTulippe’s *Lyrical Language Lab* videos on Youtube are very helpful, especially ‘Top five tips: How to identify stressed syllables in English words’.

<sup>15</sup> As Canadian poet Susan Glickman puts it, ‘Criticism comes afterward if something doesn’t sound right. And what sounds right changes, as the conventions themselves change, from age to age’ (2022: 24).

<sup>16</sup> The observant reader will spot the variations in Australian spelling (metre) and American spelling (meter).

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of this limerick and subsequent limericks generated see this extended Facebook conversation with West Australian poet Alan Fyfe (and others) here: <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=alan%20fyfe%20limerick>. We came to the conclusion that there is something about the metrical pattern of a limerick that predisposes it towards humour.

<sup>18</sup> See Finch, ‘Dickinson and patriarchal meter: A theory of metrical codes’ (first published as a journal article in 1987 in PMLA); Antony Easthope, *Poetry as discourse* for Marxist analysis; and also Caroline Cooper, *Noises in the Blood* in relation to Jamaican english-language poetry and popular culture, as well as Maude Dikobe, ‘Bending the iambic pentameter’ in relation to African english-language poetry.

<sup>19</sup> Some inroads are already being made; see for example, Ann Ang and Ian Tan’s ‘The poesis and politics of English-es in Singapore’ (2022).

<sup>20</sup> This is the scansion ChatGPT gave me, on 1 May 2023, for the first line of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Sonnet 34:

/xx/x/x/x

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

As I scan it, this line clearly has eleven syllables and at least five primary stresses, possibly six. ChatGPT gives it only nine syllables with four primary stresses.

<sup>21</sup> This reminds me of the Biblical tension between grace and law, or, to put it differently, how showing mercy is bigger than keeping all the rules; or, to put it differently again, how love trumps everything.



## Works cited

- Ang, A & ! Tan 2022 The poesis and politics of English-es in Singapore: Intersubjective world-ing in the poetry of Joshua Ip and Hamid Roslan, *ELH* 89.2: 547–73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2022.0010>
- Attridge, D & T Carper 2003 *Meter and Meaning: An Introduction to Rhythm in Poetry*, Abingdon: Routledge
- Bede 1991 [c.800] *Libri II: de arte metrica et de schematibus et tropis – The Art of Poetry and Rhetoric* (edited and translated by CB Kendall), Saarbrücken: AQ Verlag
- Britannica 1998 Metre, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/metre-prosody>
- Coleridge, ST 1817 Metrical feet, <https://allpoetry.com/Metrical-Feet> (accessed 17 April 2023)
- Cooper, C 1995 *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the ‘Vulgar’ Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Dikobe, M 2010 Bending the iambic pentameter: The political economy of experience in teaching and learning poetry, *NAWA Journal of Language and Communication* 4.1: 1–14
- Dunkelberg, K 2017 *A Writer’s Craft*, London: Palgrave
- Easthope, A 1983 *Poetry as Discourse*, Abingdon: Routledge
- Finch, A 1993 *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Finch, A 1987 Dickinson and patriarchal meter: A theory of metrical codes, *PMLA* 102.2: 166–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/462545>
- Fussell, P 1979 *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (rev. ed.), New York: Random
- Glickman, S 2022 *Artful Flight: Essays and Reviews 1985–2019*, Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine’s Quill
- Hass, R 2017 *A Little Book on Form*, New York: HarperCollins
- Hetherington, P & C Atherton 2020 *Prose Poetry: An Introduction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Hopkins, GM 1985 [1918] *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, London: Penguin Classics
- LaTulippe, RM 2020 Top five tips: How to identify stressed syllables in English words, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0R2vTDyoQRk> (accessed 1 May 2023)
- Lo, MWW 2023 Quick trip to the beach before the early service, *Christmas Walk: Twelve Poems for Rosy Cheeks*, Nottingham: Candlestick Press, 14
- Lo, MWW 2022 O Covid, you finally got me, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1552930718491222&set=a.100908897026752> (accessed 24 Nov 2023)
- Lo, MWW 2014 Late harvest Semillon, in D Haskell (ed.), *Cullen Wines Poetry Collection*, Margaret River: Margaret River Press, n.p.
- McAuley, J 1966 *A Primer of English Versification*, Sydney: Sydney University Press
- Pang, A 2012 Candles, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyWEdu3I-5A> (accessed 24 April 2023)
- Poetry Foundation n.d. Rhythm, *Glossary of Poetic Terms*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/rhythm> (accessed 10 April 2023)

Richards, K 2015 *The Story of Australian English*, Sydney: NewSouth

Simpson, J & A David (eds.) 2012 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages* (9th ed.), New York: Norton

Stillman, F 1966 *The Poet's Manual and Rhyming Dictionary*, London: Thames & Hudson

Yokoyama, S 2018 Digital technologies for exploring prosody: A brief historical overview, *ARCADE*, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/digital-technologies-exploring-prosody-brief-historical-overview> (accessed 21 November 2022)

---

### About the author

Miriam Wei Wei Lo writes because life is too short to let it pass without comment. She is a 2023 *Westerly* Mid Career Fellow and her latest book of poetry *Who Comes Calling?* has just been released by West Australian Poets Publishing. She currently teaches creative writing at Sheridan Institute of Higher Education in Boorloo/Perth. Follow her on Instagram [@miriam-weiweilo](#)

---



**AXON: Creative Explorations**

2023 vol 13.2 *Out of the Ordinary: On poetry and the world*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973

**DOI:** 10.54375/001/4pkk68wz6k  
**Keywords:** essay, sonnet, Black American  
poetry,

# IS THE AMERICAN SONNET BLACK?

Katharine Coles

*University of Utah*, ORCID: 0000-0002-0849-5111

## **Abstract**

“Is the American Sonnet Black” traces the history of Black poetry in the United States from the 18th Century forward, beginning with Phillis Wheatly and ending with Terrance Hayes. It makes the case that work by Black poets has been not only present but essential to the development of American poetry and our understanding of how all poets must work to position themselves simultaneously as outsiders and as insiders to their tradition. In the cases of those poets whose bodies (by virtue of gender and/or race) mark them visibly and culturally as “outsiders,” this positioning is more difficult and complex in a way that may lead to creative breakthroughs in how those poets use form to navigate the content specific to their experience.

## IS THE AMERICAN SONNET BLACK?

Katharine Coles

### Author's note

In 2018, two years after the American election of Donald Trump, Terrance Hayes published *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018a). Most American poetry readers had already encountered some of its poems, all carrying the same title, in journals. Hayes had begun his project with the goal of writing a sonnet every day of the Trump presidency. He hit pause after 200 poems, 70 of which made it into the book.

Within two years of that collection, Hayes also published his selection of Wanda Coleman's poems, *Wicked Enchantment* (2020), which includes poems for which she coined the term 'American sonnets'; and his nonfiction book *To Float in the Space Between* (2018b), a meditation on poet Eldredge Cleaver and Hayes' other fathers, literary and literal. In bringing out these books more or less together, Hayes furthered my own too-slowly developing understanding that, as Ed Simon says in *Review 31* (n.d.), 'African American literature and American literature are synonymous; nothing truly original, unique, great, or transcendent in American letters doesn't bear the trace of its African origins'.

Despite this now-evident truth, I never, as a student poet in the late 20th century, encountered a poem by a Black poet in any classroom, other than Langston Hughes' 'Dreams' (1994 [1923]), probably in middle or primary school. Adrienne Rich introduced me to the poems of Audre Lorde soon after I finished graduate school, and a working friendship with E Ethelbert Miller brought me to June Jordan and others, but those encounters occurred *outside* the institutions meant to shape my understanding of and participation in American poetry. Later, as my own career launched and well-intentioned American literature departments, including mine, began to incorporate first courses, then programs, in African American Literature, such encounters came only to students who actively sought them, from specialists in that specific tradition, as something requiring space but separate – not to say segregated – within the larger tradition. They remained elective.

Many of us began some years ago to bring Black poets into our classrooms; however, for too long, my own incorporation of these poets remained uninformed and unsystematic, so failed to address how deeply this work is woven into the American tradition. Through my reading of Hayes and my accidental discovery of Wheatley via Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' *The Age of Phillis* (2020), I began a deeper, if idiosyncratic, dive into the tradition and a rethinking of what it comprises. This essay expresses my ongoing effort not to replicate my experience in the upcoming generation, but to bring work by Black poets to take its natural place and reveal its force as it acts in and on our collective study of American poetry.

For both pedagogical and personal reasons, then, this essay departs from my late determination to write only *lyric* essays on poetics. A meditation on poetic practice, it does not pretend to overturn or replace the excellent scholarship that continues among experts in Black American poetry. For those interested in a scholarly dive into the Black American sonnet in particular, I recommend Hollis Robbins' *Forms of Contention* (2020), which argues that the primary influence for Black sonnets lies in previous Black sonnets, and that the sonnet is the perfect form for the examination of a history of enslavement and of continuing forms of bondage. This argument

might seem to oppose mine that, as a site in which poets work out and through their complex relationship to the larger tradition, the sonnet's history and status as the quintessential white, European form is essential to its meanings and uses among Black poets. I believe, however, that these two arguments can happily co-exist.

## Is the American sonnet black?

### 1 *The first*

In her essay 'The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America', about the 18<sup>th</sup>-century American Black poet Phillis Wheatley, American poet June Jordan wrote, 'It was not natural. And she was the first'. Also, 'A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home. How should there be Black poets in America?' (Jordan 2002). Jordan suggests that *freedom* and *at-homeness*, not to mention *naturalness*, allow a poet to reside fully in body and mind at once, creating the space in which they may both play with and push back against poetic form and the larger poetic tradition, making it their own.

In her own time and since, Wheatley has triggered discomfort and contention among readers. Though she began publishing poems at thirteen, she was brought at eighteen, before the 'elders' of Massachusetts would allow the publication of her first book, to face a tribunal for examination. The group, which included John Hancock and the colonial governor of Massachusetts, thought it 'unlikely' that she – in her African, female, young, enslaved body – could have written her poems herself.<sup>1</sup> Having easily 'passed', she quickly became a poetry superstar, partly but not only because she was such an anomaly, before she was manumitted then abandoned to die in penury at 31.

Two hundred years later, in the 1960s, she was vilified by members of the Black Arts Movement, for whom, Henry Louis Gates says in 'Phillis on Trial', 'her sacrifices, her courage, her humiliations, her trials, could never be enough'; her poems, which he encourages us to '*read . . . with all the resourcefulness that she herself brought to her craft*', had become the model for all 'forms of Black expression that failed the new test of cultural affirmation' (2003: 87).

Wheatley's initial fall from fame is complex, involving her loss of patronage after she was freed and her original enslavers died, the onset of the Revolutionary War, and a marriage of which many former supporters disapproved. All this coincided with a turn within the larger American literary community away from neoclassicism as the very long Romantic age many poets still inhabit today was finding its feet. Perhaps undervaluing their subtleties of tone, today more than ever poets find neoclassical poems artificial, even robotic in their formal contrivances. We also forget that neoclassicism gave North America its first two great anglophone poets, both women, one enslaved. Outsiders to their adopted land *and* England, Anne Bradstreet then Wheatley became celebrities on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> While Michael Wigglesworth and Edward Taylor wrote endless, humourless sermons, these two slyly used irony and wit, still prized here and in England at the time, to undermine Puritan, patriarchal, monarchist, *and* pro-slavery positions, slipping doubts and queries between their lines. As poet-scholar Honorée Fanonne Jeffers notes in 'Phillis Reimagined' (De Groot & Jeffers 2020), the *Poetry Off the Shelf* podcast interview that first brought my closer attention to Wheatley, neoclassical conventions even allowed Wheatley to use Apollo to overtly praise her *given* deity, Christ, while subversively honouring the sun god of her Ghanaian childhood.

Still, such attitudes linger. One of the most celebrated Black poets writing today, Terrance Hayes, begins the poem Ed Simon calls an '*Ars poetica* for the black poetic tradition', the '**American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin**' that opens his collection of that name, like this: 'The black poet would love to say his century began/With Hughes or, God forbid, Wheatley' (Hayes 2017a). In 'This Is Not Sentimental Verse', Simon says, 'Hayes' initial lines sets [sic] up a tension between what the "black poet" desires (the respectability of official academic lineage) and the reality (the authenticity of poets innumerable whose names we'll never know)' (Simon n.d.). Indeed, Hayes, whose writings I will discuss later, doesn't disavow Wheatley entirely (or Hughes, whose poems I will also consider); though he arguably addresses the controversy around her partly with tongue-in-cheek, he also can't embrace her.

In my reading, Wheatley's failure to revive even as the literary community works to rediscover Black poets comes, and persists, not only because she so fully absorbed her white, Eurocentric education and models, fed (as June Jordan notes) a language and artistic practice that couldn't quite contain her and that she couldn't shake free of, however she mastered it; but also because she seems in her poems at times to live inside that very point of view, not only white and Christian but explicitly racist, as if with her education she came to inhabit a skin other than her own.

Yet, there remains the fact of her skin: she did inhabit it.

Here is exhibit A against her:

#### **On Being Brought from Africa to America**

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
'Their colour is a diabolic die.'  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Without question, such sentiments, when read straight, offend contemporary racial sensibilities, including those of white writers like me. Still, I would argue that even these lines show as much cunning as submission, using a single word to separate the speaker from the '*some*' who 'view [her] sable race with scornful eye', so that what seems to be self-hatred may serve, even bitterly, as commentary.

Jordan gives, to my mind, a deeper reading, claiming that 'in this surprising poem, this first Black poet presents us with something wholly her own, something entirely new', asserting in the line 'Once I redemption neither sought nor knew' that she, as Jordan puts it, '*Once . . . existed on other than your terms*'. Jordan also notes the claim, surprising in a time and place where Blackness was considered not only ugly but 'diabolic', that Wheatley expects to 'join th' angelic train', and says so.

If one concurs with Jordan's readings, to interpret this poem as an unironic celebration of Wheatley's childhood kidnapping (Hayes doesn't, I think, but he seems wryly aware others do), is at least obtuse. But why, a contemporary reader might wonder, does Wheatley present her argument with such subtlety it can easily be missed, making her central assertion mean its

opposite? For me, the answer lies partly in poetic conventions (this is what poets, especially but not only neoclassical poets, do), partly in what we expect from political poetry and how we expect it to behave in our time, and even more, I suspect, in the physical precarity in which Wheatley found herself. Here, she reproduces and enacts the delicacy of her position as poet and as person, becoming the second example we have in American poetry of a poet trying to navigate the complex situation of being lettered, gifted, and an outsider supposed to be neither, in a country that wants none of that from its poets, at least if outsidership is encoded in gender and/or, most especially, in race. As Jordan infers, neither *freedom* nor *at-homeness*, no pure comfort in the self, is permitted such a poet, whether the constraints imposed are cultural or literal, as in enslavement, which for over a century often included enforced illiteracy or its long tail.

Even Jordan somewhat downplays what Simon refers to as Wheatley's 'horrific conditions', focusing as much on the 'kindness' Wheatley's enslavers showed her. Yes, they were 'kind' in providing what Sondra O'Neal on the Poetry Foundation website calls her 'ambiguous haven' (O'Neal n.d.), at least if we compare Wheatley's conditions to the sufferings of most people enslaved in 18<sup>th</sup>-century America. Jordan also enumerates these, noting among other things 'the flogging the lynch rope the general terror and weariness'. Let's be clear, then: this first poet of the American Revolution, as Jordan tells us 'the first Black human to be published in America', wrote from an enslaved body, which her master owned, under shelter and wearing clothes and eating food her master *also* owned, dependent on his goodwill for her very life. She could, under the laws of the time, be beaten starved, sold, cast out, killed at will.<sup>3</sup>

Still, at constant risk, under her enslaver's name and religion, she used the languages he taught her and her own lived enslavement to argue, in letters as well as poems, against slavery and for the freedom of . . . her enslaver. Addressing America along with 'the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth', she says, 'No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,/Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand/Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land'. She gives 'Tyranny' no other name here, but it is impossible to separate it, and its 'iron chain', from her own experience, including her crossing of the Middle Passage in the hold of a ship, which almost killed her and probably contributed to her lifelong frailty and early death. Indeed, she roots her advocacy for America's freedom in her interrupted childhood, when she 'by seeming cruel fate/Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat'. Vividly imagining her parents' grief at her kidnapping, while pragmatically not belabouring her current conditions and sufferings, she asks nonetheless, 'can I then but pray/Others may never feel tyrannic sway?'

Wheatley also began the long tradition of Black poets marking their lineage through white/European *and* Black/African poets, reaching back in 'Ode to Maecenas' to ally herself with the Black Classical poet Terence, also enslaved. In the same poem, politic as ever, she praises her own patron and enslaver as a modern Maecenas – another move suggested and supported by her participation in the prevailing neoclassical discourse. In that poem, and within the conventions of that tradition, she also argues her own case as a poet, not denigrating her skill in comparison with Terence's, yet complaining, *presuming*, that her (Black, female) craft will never be so elevated, and eerily foretelling the fate of her own work:

But say, ye *Muses*, why this *partial* grace,  
To *one alone* of *Afric's* sable race;  
From age to age transmitting thus *his* name  
With the first glory in the rolls of fame?



In such examples, we see Wheatley working carefully, delicately, to demonstrate mastery of received (European) forms while questioning hardened practices, marking her poems with her own history and experiences, and setting a trajectory for the poets who might follow her. Her negotiations are concealed because she works so explicitly as an outsider; they are starkly visible for the same reason. From her we learn that, like all poets, Black poets in America will work with various degrees of resistance to incorporate their literary culture and history *and* to distinguish themselves; by applying technique in part to serve outsidership, the artist changes art, and perhaps culture too.

The more poets are marked, not just psychically, in imagination and culture, but also bodily and visibly, as ‘outsider’, the more difficult it becomes to establish themselves as part of the larger culture in the first place, and the more closely examined their experiments are. As in the case of Wheatley, the initial assumption might be that *if that poet wrote it, I won’t like it; if I like it, surely that poet can’t have written it*. In the case of Black American poets in particular, any studied performance of traditional skill may be read as naïve or banal. Likewise, with these poets, deviations or performances of distinctiveness – indulged and often ultimately rewarded in white male poets – may mark them to the dominant poetic culture as bizarre, crude, too angry (especially in the case of women poets) or (in Wheatley’s case) not angry enough, or simply, as scholar and poet Jen Webb puts it satirically in conversation, ‘not really very good, right?’

Not good at what?

## 2 Later

By moving quickly past the 19th century, I don’t mean to suggest that there were no Black poets during the antebellum period, although the Black voices of the time that still garner most of our attention (Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Booker T Washington, Frederick Douglass) belonged to anti-abolitionists who wrote largely in prose. As Erika DeSimone and Fidel Louis make clear through *Voices Beyond Bondage: An Anthology of Verse by African Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (2014), Black poets wrote and were read throughout that era. Their poems, often formally conventional and addressing patriotic, religious, or anti-slavery themes, were published generally for Black readers in Black-owned newspapers that, like most newspapers of the time, regularly printed poems in their pages.<sup>4</sup>

Still, by 1740, even before Wheatley’s birth and arrival in America, laws had been enacted in many Southern states against teaching enslaved people to read and write. These prohibitions continued through the end of the American Civil War in 1865, and in some states beyond. While many Black people, even those living under such laws, did become lettered, some in secret, it is not until the late 19th and early 20th century, with our first full generations of Black poets to come of age as *legally* literate, and the beginning of the Great Migration that concentrated Black populations in northern cities including New York, that Black written verse and the artistic tension it enacts between received European forms and Black/African-based tropes and positions re-emerged at last on a large scale, helping to spur the experimentalisms of the Harlem Renaissance.

Early formalists like Claude McKay worked to prove their agility specifically with the sonnet, inconveniently just then falling out of favour, as neoclassicism had been when Wheatley was writing. McKay’s sonnets follow Wheatley’s example, using the conventions of a traditional,

deeply embedded European form to their advantage. What freedom the sonnet offered inhered in its volta, which McKay and others found useful in turning initially conventional scenes or arguments on themselves in ways that were subtly subversive. 'In Bondage',<sup>5</sup> which first appeared in McKay's 1922 volume *Harlem Shadows*, begins, as we saw Wheatley do, by imagining Africa as a happier, more carefree place, '[w]here man, and bird, and beast, live leisurely,/And the old earth is kind, and ever yields/Her goodly gifts to all her children'. The poem continues in this happy imagining, where the children, notably, live 'free', until reaching its final couplet, which reminds me of the turn in 'On Being Brought from Africa to America'.<sup>6</sup> In its own subtle subversion, 'In Bondage' acknowledges, 'But I am bound with you in your mean graves,/O black men, simple slaves of ruthless slaves'. Here, the speaker admits that these happier memories are not his own, but those of the enslaved ancestors he addresses, now in the grave. In an even more nuanced double turn to end the final line of the poem, which again reminds me of Wheatley, he depicts the enslavers themselves as also enslaved, dehumanised by their own 'ruthless' practice.

'The Harlem Dancer', originally published in 1922 in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* edited by James Weldon Johnson, also turns power back onto and against figures first depicted as powerful, who watch 'young prostitutes' dance for their pleasure. Amid the observers' excitement, the 'dancer' moves as if at home, contained within herself. She appears 'graceful and calm', free and apart like 'a proudly swaying palm', even while (implicitly white) 'wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys' look on, 'devour[ing] her shape' as if they consume her. Again, though, the volta upends everything, enacting its own complex if small uprising. Though the dancer smiles, she does so 'falsely'; she becomes free only by dissociating, by making of her body a lie and removing 'her self' from 'that strange place' that should be a home.

Though McKay influenced Langston Hughes, only thirteen years younger, it can be hard to believe based on form and music that they were near contemporaries, both members of the movement that would become the Harlem Renaissance. While McKay made his experiments within given European forms, which he tightly controlled, Hughes would root his own poetic music in jazz and blues, distinctly American genres made suspect by African roots. He used these as vehicles of innovation, reinvigorating, yes, even the sonnet for his use and creating what Hughes critic Arnold Rampersad (1997) calls 'novel fusions of jazz and blues with traditional verse'.

In his essay on Hayes, Simons reads that tossed-off 'god forbid' not as rejection but as a sign of Hayes' own enacted 'ambivalence' in regard to both Wheatley and Hughes – an ambivalence Hayes, in the case of Hughes, himself explores in a 2018 essay, 'As for Langston Hughes', for *Bomb*. Here, with no little tenderness and sometimes faint praise, he calls Hughes 'a great poet who wrote respectable poems' (2018c). Though Hayes does not himself desire even a little to be 'respectable', I take him as being largely descriptive: one goal of some of the poems, often achieved, was, as with Wheatley, to present the 'negro' poet as belonging to and having culture<sup>7</sup> to a demonstrably sceptical audience. Specifically, Hayes refers to Hughes' first published poem, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' (2002 [1920]), in which Hughes describes the formation of his poetic soul and identity as rooted in the deep history of the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile, but also as belonging, through the Mississippi and Abraham Lincoln's visit to New Orleans, to the newer history of America.

After what Rampersad (1997) calls a ‘hard turn to the left’ in the early thirties, Hughes’ poetry during and after World War 2 tends to avoid overt engagement with politics. His move toward the centre, among other things, gave rise to the disapproval of the Black Arts poets of the sixties, who, as Hayes says in *Bomb* of Amiri Baraka, often (and for important reasons) had ‘no patience for nuance’.<sup>8</sup> I would argue that this criticism also ignored not only Hughes’ groundbreaking early work in his inaugural 1926 collection *The Weary Blues*, which was at the time attacked for illuminating hardships of Black lower-class life, but also later books like the (for our purposes) aptly-named 1942 collection, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, which not only returned to his interest in Black music but also strongly criticised racial segregation. As Rampersad (2002) notes in his two-volume Hughes biography, to which Hayes refers, many who quote the notebook in which Hughes wrote ‘Politics can be the graveyard of the poet’ stop too soon – an observation I would extend to much reading of the work. As reported by Hayes, the notebook continues, ‘Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country. Therefore, how can a poet keep out of politics? Hang yourself, poet, in your own words. Otherwise you are dead.’

More than ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, and other poems like ‘Dreams’ that are sufficiently abstract to keep Hughes ‘respectable’ even for middle-school anthologies in Ron DeSantis’s Florida, I am more interested in the jazz poems. These, evoking details of Black life and deploying Black music and vernacular, seem to speak ‘with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country’. For my purposes here, my interest piques further when they intersect and play with that most English of forms, the sonnet. The fourteen-line ‘50-50’, presenting a mordant view of what shared life between a Black man and woman looked like in America’s 1930s, originally appeared in *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) and begins with a woman lamenting her man’s lack of attachment. At the end, she asks at his invitation what would bring commitment, and in the poem’s final double turn, a kind of punchline, he answers, ‘Share your bed –/And your money, too.’

This Hughes, the Hughes who published in *Poetry* in the forties when it was still cutting-edge but who is not widely anthologised today, uses Black idioms both to reveal and to publicly critique gender relations in Black culture (something Hayes still seems brave in doing today). ‘*Seashore through dark glasses (Atlantic City)*’ (1947: 248), a sonnet by the 13-to-15-line standard Wanda Coleman provides (which she arguably gets partly from Hughes), gives us a different take on a ‘Harlem Dancer’-type scene, here implicitly critiquing the ‘respectability’ of white (‘beige’) outsiders who ‘dignify’ a Harlem club, participating vicariously in the scene they pretend to deplore, commenting that ‘*Such negros/Disgrace the race!*’

Within the jauntiness of its broken meters, the poem also offers such deep pleasures in rhymes and cross/internal-rhymes as its rhyme of ‘Philadelphia’ in line 5 with ‘Binocular the A[tlantic]’ in line 2 and of ‘frantic’ in line 4 with both the ‘Atlantic’ of line 2 and the ‘Arctic’ buried in ‘Arctic Avenue’ in line 10.

These two poems, among others, have been available online on the Poetry Foundation website for no more than a dozen years or so, since poems originally published in *Poetry* began to be archived online. That *The Weary Blues* was reissued only in 2022, and that we still know Hughes mostly from his ‘respectable’ anthology poems, shows (as with Wheatley) both the promise and the drawbacks inhering in the strategy of performing one kind of poet while being another.

### 3 *Another century gone, with a bridge*

I will now skip over most of the next century, too, speeding with a sad wave past Robert Hayden and our second Black Poet Laureate, Rita Dove, both attentive formalists in their own rights. Before moving into the late 20th century, though, I'll note the evolution across it of the poems of our first Black Poet Laureate, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), who began working in the late Harlem Renaissance (her first poem was published in 1930, like Wheatley's when she was 13) and makes a bridge between those earlier poets and what emerges in the late 20th century.

From its beginning, her work brought praise from the white literary establishment. The New York publisher Harper & Brothers, which would continue to publish her work as Harper & Row, brought out her first collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, in 1945, and followed in 1949 with *Annie Allen*, a collection of sonnets that in 1950 received the first Pulitzer Prize awarded a Black poet. Twenty-odd years after Hughes was criticised for portraying Black life in his jazz-inflected *The Weary Blues*, Brooks was lauded for her mastery of European forms and the conventions and techniques of her moment, through which both collections depict Black life in mid-century Chicago with a clear eye, even tone, and quietly tender heart.

Though Brooks often absents herself from the poems, using personae or acting as a kind of lens to present carefully selected details as if objectively, many of her lyrics are deeply personal. A sonnet from *A Street in Bronzeville*, '*my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell*' (Brooks 1945), begins with its remarkable title suggesting a necessary heroic descent into the underworld. In the classroom, I make my case for this sonnet as the poem of a woman working as a secretary, waiting for her life as a poet to begin.<sup>9</sup> Still, its opening lines – 'I hold my honey and I store my bread/In little jars and cabinets of my will' – create such an intimate space that my young students insist on reading it as the poem of a jilted lover trying to get through the semester.

In the 1960s, Brooks' work, always grounded in Black experience, took a turn, drawing on the greater radicalism of the Black Arts Movement.<sup>10</sup> By the 1970s, she had left Harper & Row for Broadside Press and published only with Black presses thereafter. In this move, critic George E Kent notes that she 'managed to bridge the gap between the academic poets of her generation in the 1940s and the young Black militant writers of the 1960s' (Kent n.d.), even as she became United States Poet Laureate in 1985 and kept her Poet Laureateship of the state of Illinois for 32 years, from 1968 until her death in 2000.

Though her commitment to Black subjects is present from the beginning of her work, in the sixties she entered what, according to Kent, she called a 'new consciousness' and 'black fellow-feeling', as depicted in her turn to jazz rhythms and more explicit political content in such poems as '*The Sermon on the Warpland*' (Brooks 1994) and '*The Third Sermon on the Warpland*' (Brooks 1994). Perhaps one of her most revealing late poems is '*Riot*'<sup>11</sup> (Brooks 1994), which begins with words from a real Black man, Martin Luther King, Jr ('A riot is the language of the unheard'), then depicts a civil rights action through the eyes and voice of a privileged white man, who refuses to make way for it and is killed. Slyly eliding questions of whether and how to deploy a 'Black' voice in this context by satirically adopting an invented white one, whose diction creates a contrast with the jazz rhythms of the other sections, the poem ends with John Cabot crying, patrician with and into his last breath, 'Lord!/Forgive these niggahs that know not what they do'.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4 Almost here

I could theorise that in the work of all these poets the use of given European forms becomes a kind of mask for a more subversive content – a mask the poet may at points let slip or remove altogether. What happens to the ‘American Sonnet’, and to Wanda Coleman, the poet who names it, may prove this speculation even as it makes space for something else to emerge later. Bookending Hughes’ 20th century, Coleman adds her ‘American sonnet’ to the Italian and English, names it, and marks it definitively *Black*.

To talk about Coleman, Hayes, and the sonnet, I need to loop in Dickinson, the quintessential insider-outsider American, whom both laud and resist, reminding us, even as they turn the sonnet firmly to their own uses, that her skill in the service of disobedience is part of their tradition, too.

Hayes imagines Dickinson as ‘the abandoned lover of Orpheus’ who ‘loved to masturbate/[while] Whispering dark blue lullabies to Death’ (2018a: 21). I can believe in this depiction, which cuts the male speaker out while leaving the female poet her agency and pleasure; it is more accurate and respectful, and more frank, than Billy Collins’ ‘Taking off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes’, in which Dickinson must, ‘motionless’ and silent, stand looking out the window while the male poet gets himself off, voicing her lines while he imagines undoing her ‘tiny and numerous’ buttons.

As I’ve written elsewhere, Dickinson makes us *think* her poems rhyme regularly, even when (often) they don’t. In my favourite of her sonnets, ‘He fumbles at your soul’ (Dickinson n.d.), the lines of which are three and four beats long rather than five, the first and third lines of each quatrain *and the final couplet* don’t rhyme at all; she creates the illusion of dense and regular rhyme through what I call sonic smearing. In this visualisation using the Poemage tool (Coles 2014), examining which words in the poem have sonic relationships with the word ‘soul’, we discover that almost all of them do:

The screenshot shows the Poemage v 0.1 interface. On the left, a 'Set View' panel lists various rhyme schemes like 'SONIC RHYMES', 'Identical Rhyme/Rhyme Riche', 'Perfect Masculine', etc. The central 'Poem View' displays the text of 'Emily Dickinson (c.1845)' with words like 'fumbles', 'soul', 'before they drop', 'your', 'nature', 'blow', 'further heard', 'The', 'Your breath', 'limb', 'straighter', 'Your brain', 'food', 'bolt', 'That', 'your', 'When wind', 'can', 'Forest', 'in the Park', 'The', 'Universe', 'is', 'Soul'. Colored lines connect these words to the word 'SOWL' in the right-hand 'Path View' panel, showing a dense network of sonic relationships. The interface also includes a 'Modes' section with '1', '2', '3', 'shuffle', and 'nodes' buttons, and a bottom toolbar with 'clear', 'beautiful mess', 'hover word', 'show ambiguity', 'custom set', 'show words', 'show context', and 'fill intersecting paths'.



Though it surely applies negatively to Dickinson here, and though she doesn't say so explicitly, I suspect Stephanie Burt's comment in *Slate* praising Hayes' sonnets for knowing 'how sonnets are supposed to sound' is made in part at Coleman's expense. Coleman's 'American sonnets', like Hughes' poems but with no nods at all to 'respectability', even carrying, as in the beginning of 'American Sonnet 61' (2022: 63), the occasional threat of violence, ally themselves in their rhythms with jazz to engage a history of oppression. Within this engagement, she works on a more personal level to 'rebuild the ruins of [her] poetic promise, from/the infinite alphabet of apherobles'.<sup>13</sup> Calling these poems her 'slave songs', Coleman refers not only to a musical legacy that arises from the history of Black abduction and enslavement, but also echoes (intentionally or not) poems from Wheatley forward which, like some we've looked at, consider that history as present and ongoing.

Coleman in her sonnets does what Burt notices in Hayes, 'stuffing [her] own sonnets full of midline rhymes . . . then omitting rhymes where a reader might expect them', rhyming that echoes Dickinson's in its density and in its internal and external-to-internal operation. 'American Sonnet 100' (2022: 102) does not rely heavily on end rhymes (though there's pleasure in rhymes like 'Erato's' with 'porter's', or with rhymes over a distance as with 'jest' and, eight lines later, 'blessed'); the sonic intensity comes from rhyming internally and sequentially, as in the play across the first two lines of 'dost', 'Erato's', 'breast', 'poet's', and 'jest', and the way in which the aforementioned rhyme of 'Erato's' with 'porter's' four lines later sweeps 'wordspout', 'gangstered', and even eventually 'luscious' and 'poisoned' and 'queens and sputterings' into their play, making clear in just a few lines that Coleman, like Dickinson, smears. As in Dickinson's poem, by the end of Coleman's nearly every word is implicated with every other.

If Coleman's sonnets, unlike Hayes', still don't sound the way a sonnet is 'supposed' to, this is not for lack of knowledge. As Dora Malech writes in *The Kenyon Review* (2017), Coleman's sonnets respond in part to an editor who called her work 'jazz poetry', as an insult. 'A decade later the first . . . appeared unbidden', Coleman says, after which she 'reread all of Shakespeare's sonnets, sonnets by Melville and others'. However, 'Since jazz is an open form . . . [she] decided . . . the jazz sonnet would be as open as possible', adhering to what became for her, as it was for Hughes, a 13-to-15-line rule. She 'jazzifies' the rhythm, she says, 'to have fun – to blow my soul' (Malech 2017: n.p.).

Like Dickinson's scalping thunderbolt.

Indeed, as will Hayes, Coleman recognises (not always honouring) those poetic predecessors and others, in the poems that appear in *Wicked Enchantment* dedicating poems to Bishop and Berryman, even, in 'Pseudo Dickinsonian Cento Blues', playfully rewriting Dickinson, sending her up with almost decorous raunch, noting that '*every blossom on her bush/adjusts its humbled head*' (2020: 181).

## 5 Today, literally

In an interview with Courtney Faye Taylor of *Slice Magazine*, Terrance Hayes echoes June Jordan's essay on Wheatley, saying that Coleman did 'all kinds of wild and inventive stuff, and to me that's really mind blowing, the sense of *freedom* that she's demonstrating' (in Taylor 2020: n.p.; emphasis added).

Ed Simon calls Hayes' opening 'American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin' (Hayes 2017a), the one that mentions Wheatley and Hughes, an '*Ars poetica* for the black poetic tradition', one

Hayes defines, Simon says, ‘not with the academic litany of approved names, but from the nameless who spoke in an idiom of incalculable influence for American culture’. This description is beautiful, emotionally on point, and true as far as it goes – but not *entirely* accurate, given Hayes’ willingness to give Sylvia Plath, as Simon also notes, five lines (more than Hughes and Wheatley put together; more than any other named poet than Orpheus) in the same poem, and to name such poets as Dickinson, Bishop, and Bly in his line of influence.

After his own poems, the value of which, to me, are a given, Terrance Hayes’ greatest contribution to poetry so far – and one that my own students, deeply moved by it, wish to emulate – may be the generosity and explicitness with which he continues to acknowledge the whole range of his influences, an act that with the same elegant but forceful gesture places him and the Black writers he admires alongside everyone else, in their rightful places in the tradition. This becomes especially clear when, a century after the Harlem Renaissance, we add to his collection explicitly titled after and honouring Wanda Coleman’s ‘American sonnets’ the near-simultaneous publication (also in 2018) of his *To Float in the Space Between*, a memoir built ingeniously around an Etheridge Knight poem but mentioning other poetic ‘fathers’ including Bly; and his 2020 selection of Coleman’s poems, *Wicked Enchantment*. I know both these poets and others in a much deeper way than before because of Hayes’ work, which I picked up seeking not so much them as him, and finding all. Beyond their continuous reference to Coleman, his *American Sonnets to My Past and Future Assassin* also scatter references to his predecessors throughout, as a prolonged exploration and extension of the tensions I have been addressing in this essay between engaging a tradition at once from within and as a visible outsider.

Today, the day I finish this essay on deadline, Hayes’ new collection *So to Speak* (2023a) is published and arrives in my hands. Today also, Hayes gives a late afternoon interview to Mary Louise Kelly for NPR, in which she observes that he ‘didn’t succeed’ in his stated goal of ‘get[ting] away from these sonnets’. In response to her comment that he ‘[doesn’t] strike her as a guy who enjoys being constrained by a bunch of rules’ (Kelly & Hayes 2023), and her enumeration, as if she finds them exhausting, of a few of the rules of the sonnet, he responds that he teaches his students ‘about bending the rules so that we know that there was a rule to be broken. Otherwise, it’s anarchy’ (Kelly & Hayes 2023).

While there are eight ‘American Sonnets’ (only two ‘for My Past and Future Assassin’) in the new collection, it includes other poems in an astonishing array of forms, my favourite of which is an ‘*Illustrated Octavia Butler Do-It-Yourself Sestina*’ (Hayes 2023b). Here and elsewhere, he brings together his ongoing drawing practice, which also honours his influences, with his poetic practice, which has long included the invention of poetic forms. His most famous invention so far has been the golden shovel,<sup>14</sup> the original of which used ‘We Real Cool’. Douglas Kearney, Camille, Dungy, and others have taken up the form, weaving it ever-more deeply into the Black poetic tradition.

In the NPR interview, Hayes goes on, to my delight, to talk about the volta, which lies at the heart of the form, and suggests ‘the idea that you’re going to have to change your mind at some point’ is inherently American: ‘You know, we would never have just one volta ‘cause, for us, it’s just going to be constant changes’. In his vision, and in the practice of his predecessors, the volta is neither rhetorical or decorous, enacting the anarchic American spirit inside a form that, in perhaps his most famous ‘*American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin*’, he describes as ‘part prison,/Part panic closet’ (Hayes 2017b). In this poem, he addresses the sonnet form itself, and in so doing also examines both its opportunities and its limitations for a



Black poet, whose 'persona' in the poem is 'lock[ed] . . . in a dream-inducing sleeper hold' and who nonetheless in its turnings makes the most of the small space given him. Among others of the sonnets that directly address the form, Blackness, or both, this one implicates not only the Black poet/speaker but also the reader, who has volunteered (and keeps volunteering) to take this switch-backing journey with him. Together, speaker and reader crisscross the landscape not only of Black literary history but of a political history that, like its metaphor the sonnet, keeps structuring and restructuring itself, in all of its permutations trying and failing to escape the racism embedded in its nation's laws, institutions, and, yes, its literary forms.

At the same time that these sonnets appear to embrace their constraining form, however, I would argue (Burt notwithstanding) that all the poets I've discussed from Hughes forward, not excepting Hayes, torque their sonnets' content not only through their voltas but also by enacting in their turns a distinctive musical spin, sometimes subtly and sometimes not calling on jazz and Black vernacular speech. One **famous example** among Hayes' sonnets deploys the 'N' word over and over, making it a poem a white American won't speak aloud in public, Hayes' little joke.

But here is **one I can speak**, in which Hayes uses the Black vernacular grammar, now familiar even in the still mostly white halls of academe, that drops the 'to be' verb to create deliberate confusion about whether the 'you' is acting or acted upon. A line like 'You don't seem to get it, but you got it' captures the senses both of acquiring and understanding. Likewise, he places the line 'You don't seem too haunted, but you haunted' near the beginning of the poem, then repeats it as the final line, this time as a rhyming couplet with the poem's also-repeated first line: 'You don't seem to want it, but you wanted it.' This fusion of repetition into the closing couplet creates across the poem not a hard volta but a slow turn of language that changes in its recurrences and lands, at the end, differently than it began, with 'haunted' not as something the 'you' did, but as what the speaker, and his reader, are.

So the poem is left haunted, and Hayes himself, and Coleman and Brooks and Hughes and even Wheatley: all of us haunted by the histories of institutions and of poetry as enacted in their own rules and forms, and by the repeated efforts of poet-outsiders to inhabit and even to turn these histories to their own ends. My writer friends of all ethnicities would argue – have argued, as I do with myself – that such outsidersness is inherent to the position of the poet, any poet. Writing from his whiteness as I write from mine, Simon says:

'The Black poet would love to say his century began' can be read not just as the beginning of an argument about influence and canonicity within the black poetic tradition, but as a universal claim about poetry in general put forward by a specific person (the black poet).

If Simon is right, then how much more true is it that these poets and others, brilliant American outsiders trying to turn into insiders while remaining themselves, live, as Hayes argues implicitly and explicitly, at the very centre of our art.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This story has been commonly told in literature about Wheatley, including in the interview with Honorée Jeffers mentioned a little later in this essay. Henry Louis Gates gives a thorough account in 'Phillis on Trial', and there is another in podcast 620 in *Engines of Our Ingenuity* by John Lienhard. A good short biography of Wheatley by Sondra A O'Neale appears on the Poetry Foundation website.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the poet often lauded as the first great Latin American poet, the Hieronymite nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was also female.

<sup>3</sup> Wheatley was bought by Mr Wheatley as a gift and companion for his wife, to assuage her grief over a lost daughter. Wheatley was taught to read and write Greek and Latin as well as English; she was also, though frail and asthmatic, expected to work as a servant in the house. Though her freedom had been promised her, Wheatley was released from enslavement only when she otherwise refused to return to the Colonies with her enslaver. After Mr and Mrs Wheatley died, she was turned out, penniless, having received none of the substantial earnings on her poems. She died in penury at 31.

<sup>4</sup> Robbin's deep dive into the importance and growth of Black-owned periodicals over the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the development of the Black sonnet is especially useful here. Crucial to this growth is the rise in Black literacy in the South from an estimated 5–10% before the Civil War to about 50% by 1900. Currently, it is close to 90%, similar to the literacy rate among whites (see National Assessment of Adult Literacy, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> While I quote only specific lines under discussion, especially for those that may still be under copyright restrictions, I have when available included in-text links to the full sonnets discussed here. Available links to other poems can be found in the citations.

<sup>6</sup> I have no evidence that McKay specifically did or didn't know Wheatley's poems. Charita Elaine Gainey-O'Toole demonstrates conclusively that Wheatley was under active discussion among Black poets and scholars during this period in the second chapter of her 2017 dissertation, 'Strange Longings': Phillis Wheatley and the African American Literary Imagination. This dissertation provides an excellent overview of Wheatley's influence.

<sup>7</sup> Hayes opposes this persona of the 'respectable negro' to Baldwin, who actually said, in the film that someone titled *I Am Not Your Negro*, 'I am not your n---er.'

<sup>8</sup> Charita Gainey-O'Toole's 'Strange Longing' also includes a chapter on Wheatley and the Black Arts Movement.

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, who graduated with a two-year degree from Wilson Junior College, began work as a secretary, and was not to become a college teacher until the 1960s, when she began to be offered various temporary and non-tenured assignments. In 1990, she became a Professor at Chicago State University, a predominantly Black university.

<sup>10</sup> I passed over Hughes' 'The Backlash Blues' from his 1967 collection, *The Panther and the Lash*, which belongs in another discussion. Published at the end of his life and engaging the Vietnam war and related issues directly, it suggests a coming move into more overt political engagement 'within the boundaries of his country' as the US became mired in Southeast Asia. Nina Simone fans may not know that her searing protest lyrics came from her friend's poem, which he mailed to her. After he died, she performed it as she'd promised at every concert she gave.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Phillips, also writing for The Poetry Foundation in a wonderful essay about Brooks' prosody, argues that these three poems stand as part of a single sequence.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most moving (and aggravating and amusing) account in Robbins's book comes in her Chapter 6 discussion of how Amiri Baraka leaned on Brooks to give up sonnets even as he failed to give them up himself.

<sup>13</sup> You can find 'American Sonnet 61' in its entirety near the beginning of this review: <https://godine.com/book/heart-first-into-this-ruin/>.

<sup>14</sup> In her *Kenyon Review* essay 'The End of the Line: Terrance Hayes and Formal Innovation', Dora Malech calls this form 'a kind of reverse-acrostic variation', explaining that 'rather than arranging letters at the beginnings of lines to spell a word or phrase down the left-hand margin, as in a traditional acrostic, his form places whole words at the *ends* of lines, where they trace out a pre-existing poem.' Now often using only a sentence, the form takes its title from Hayes' original 2014 version, 'The Golden Shovel', which uses the entirety of Gwendolyn Brooks' short poem 'We Real Cool', subtitled 'The Pool Players. Seven at the Golden Shovel' (Brooks 1963).

### Works cited

Brooks, Gwendolyn 1945 *A Street in Bronzeville*, New York: Harper & Brothers. See: my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43315/my-dreams-my-works-must-wait-till-after-hell> (accessed June–July 2023)

Brooks, Gwendolyn 1949 *Annie Allen*, New York: Harper & Brothers

Brooks, Gwendolyn 1994 *Blacks*, Chicago: Third World Press. See: Riot, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51835/riot>; The sermon on the Warpland, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52028/the-sermon-on-the-warpland>; The third sermon on the Warpland, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51836/the-third-sermon-on-the-warpland> (all accessed June–July 2023)

Brooks, Gwendolyn 1963 *Selected Poems*, New York: Harper Row. See: We real cool, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/28112/we-real-cool> (accessed June–July 2023)

Coleman, Wanda 2022 *Heart First into This Ruin: The Complete American Sonnets*, Boston: Black Sparrow

Coleman, Wanda 2020 *Wicked Enchantment: Selected Poems* (ed. Terrance Hayes), Boston: Black Sparrow Press

Coles, Katharine 2014 Slippage, spillage, pillage, bliss: Close reading, uncertainty, and machines, *Western Humanities Review* 68.3 (Fall): 39–65,

Collins, Billy 1998 Taking off Emily Dickinson's clothes, *Poetry* (February): 277 (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=40151>)

De Groot, Helena, and Honorée Fanone Jeffers 2020 Phyllis reimagined [podcast], *Poetry Off the Shelf*, The Poetry Foundation (May 12), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/153579/phyllis-reimagined> (accessed May 2020 and July 2023)

DeSimone, Erika and Fidel Louis (eds) 2014 *Voices Beyond Bondage: An Anthology of Verse by African Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Montgomery NSW: New South Books

Dickinson, Emily (n.d.) He fumbles at your soul (J315/Fr477), *Emily Dickinson Archives*, [https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/12174883](https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12174883) (accessed October 2022)

- Gainey-O'Toole, Charita Elaine 2017 'Strange Longings': Phillis Wheatley and the African American Literary Imagination (PhD thesis), Harvard University, <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/40046547/GAINEY-OTOOLE-DISSERTATION-2017.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y> (accessed July 2023)
- Gates, Henry Louis 2003 Phillis on trial, *The New Yorker* (20 January): 82–87, [https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Gates\\_Phillis.pdf](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Gates_Phillis.pdf) (accessed July 2023)
- Hayes, Terrance 2023a *So to Speak*, New York: Penguin
- Hayes, Terrance 2023b Illustrated Octavia Butler do-it-yourself sestina, *Poetry* (March), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/159600/illustrated-octavia-butler-do-it-yourself-sestina> (accessed July 2023)
- Hayes, Terrance 2018a *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, New York: Penguin
- Hayes, Terrance 2018b *To Float in the Space Between: A Life and Work in Conversation with the Life and Work of Etheridge*, Seattle: Wave Books
- Hayes, Terrance 2018c As for Langston Hughes, *Bomb* 143 (12 April), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/as-for-langston-hughes/> (accessed July 2023)
- Hayes, Terrance 2017a American sonnet for my past and future assassin (*The black poet would love to say*), *The New Yorker* (24 July), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/31/american-sonnet-for-my-past-and-future-assassin> (accessed June–July 2023)
- Hayes, Terrance 2017b American Sonnet for my past and future assassin (*I lock you into an American sonnet*), *Poetry* (September), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143917/american-sonnet-for-my-past-and-future-assassin-598dc83c976f1> (accessed 2018–2023)
- Hayes, Terrance 2014 The golden shovel, *Lighthouse: Poems*, New York: Penguin. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55678/the-golden-shovel> (accessed 14 October 2023)
- Hughes, Langston 1994 [1923] Dreams, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, New York: Knopf. See <https://poets.org/poem/dreams> (accessed July 2023)
- Hughes, Langston 1947 Seashore through dark glasses (Atlantic City), *Poetry* (February): 248 (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=69&issue=5&page=10>)
- Hughes, Langston 2002 [1920] The Negro speaks of rivers, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Columbia: University of Minnesota Press. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44428/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers> (accessed July 2023)
- Hughes, Langston 1942 *Shakespeare in Harlem*, New York: Alfred A Knopf. See 50–50, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47877/50-50> (accessed July 2023)
- Hughes, Langston 2015 [1926] *The Weary Blues*, New York: Knopf
- Hughes, Langston 1967 *The Panther and the Lash*, New York: Alfred A Knopf
- Jeffers, Honorée Fanonne 2020 *The Age of Phillis*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press
- Johnson, James Weldon (ed) 1922 *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, New York: Harcourt Brace
- Jordan, June 2002 *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books. See: The difficult miracle of Black poetry in America, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68628/the-difficult-miracle-of-black-poetry-in-america> (accessed October 2022 and July 2023)

- Kelly, Mary Louise & Terrance Hayes 2023 Poet Terrance Hayes holds a mirror to history, headlines and himself in 'So to Speak' [interview], *All Things Considered*. NPR (27 July), <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/26/1190327652/poet-terrance-hayes-holds-a-mirror-to-history-headlines-and-himself-in-so-to-spe>
- Kent, George E (n.d.) Gwendolyn Brooks, The Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks> (accessed July 2023)
- Lienhard, John (n.d.) Phillis Wheatley, *Engines of Ingenuity* (podcast 620) <https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi620.htm> (accessed July 2023)
- Malech, Dora 2016 The end of the line: Terrance Hayes and formal innovation, *Kenyon Review* (22 December), <https://kenyonreview.org/2016/12/end-line-terrance-hayes-formal-innovation/> (accessed October 2023)
- Malech, Dora 2017 American sonnets (Part IV: As American as ...), *Kenyon Review* (27 November), <https://kenyonreview.org/2017/11/american-sonnets-part-iv-american/> (accessed October 2023)
- McKay, Claude 2022 [1922] In bondage, *Harlem Shadows*, Manhattan: Random House. See <https://poets.org/poem/bondage-0> (accessed October 2022)
- McKay, Claude 1922 The Harlem dancer, in *James Weldon Johnson (ed) The Book of American Negro Poetry*, New York: Harcourt Brace. See <https://poets.org/poem/harlem-dancer> (accessed October 2022)
- National Assessment of Adult Literacy (n.d.) *120 Years of Literacy*, National Center for Education Statistics, [https://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit\\_history.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit_history.asp) (accessed August 2023)
- O'Neal, Sondra A (n.d.) Phillis Wheatley, The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley> (accessed June–July 2023)
- Phillips, Carl (n.d.) Brooks's prosody: Three Sermons on the Warpland, The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/141970/brookss-prosody-three-sermons-on-the-warpland> (accessed July 2023)
- Rampersad, Arnold 1997 On Hughes's life and career, in WL Andrews, FS Foster, T Harris & HL Gates (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press. See <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/node/48121> (accessed July 2023)
- Rampersad, Arnold 2002 *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941–1967, I Dream a World* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), New York: Oxford University Press
- Robbins, Hollis 2020 *Forms of Contention: Influence and the African American Sonnet Tradition*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press
- Simon, Ed (n.d.) This is not sentimental verse, *Review 31*, <http://review31.co.uk/essay/view/86/this-is-not-sentimental-verse> (accessed June–July 2023)
- Taylor, Courtney Faye 2020 An Interview with Terrance Hayes (excerpted), *Slice Magazine* (5 April), <https://slicemagazine.org/an-interview-with-terrance-hayes/> (accessed July 2023)
- Wheatley, Phillis (n.d.) On being brought from Africa to America, The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45465/on-being-brought-from-africa-to-america>
- Wheatley, Phillis (n.d.) To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47706/to-the-right-honorable-william-earl-of-dartmouth> (accessed May 2020 and June–July 2023)

Wheatley, Phillis (n.d.) Ode to Maecenas, Genius.com, <https://genius.com/Phillis-wheatley-to-maecenas-annotated> (accessed May 2020 and June–July 2023)

---

### About the author

Katharine Coles is a Distinguished Professor at the University of Utah. Her ninth collection of poems, *Ghost Apples*, is just out from Red Hen Press. Her prose books include *The Stranger I Become: on Walking, Looking, and Writing* (essays), *Look Both Ways* (memoir), and two novels. She served as Poet-in-Residence at the Natural History Museum of Utah and the Salt Lake City Public Library for the Poets House FIELD WORK program, and has received awards from the US National Endowments for Arts and the Humanities, the National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artists and Writers Program, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

---