# 'A Spirit of Eclecticism': Critical Engagements with Australia's Innovative New Nineties Poetries

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s Australia's poetry milieu was enlivened by the emergence of a number of new poets and their poetry. This study groups these poets together under the title of 'new nineties poets and poetries'. For the purposes of this study 'new nineties poets and poetries' refers to poetry written for the page by poets who published their first collection between 1990 and 2000 and who continue to write into the twenty-first century. New nineties poets and their poetry are not a new 'movement' or 'school' of poets; the poetry is characterised by diverse forms, styles, approaches and practices. Within these eclectic poetic practices emerge shared concerns with the issues of embodiment, language, cultural difference and violence.

As John Leonard discusses, the "new poets evade categorization" (*New Music* xv) and it is the premise of this study that appropriate poetry criticism needs to respect and celebrate the eclecticism of new nineties poetries by resisting the convenient application of categories and divisive labels. This study attends to the critical question of what type of poetry criticism is appropriate for new nineties poetries. One answer to this question emanates from what Leonard describes as the "spirit of eclecticism" that characterises this new poetry (*New Music* xv). Criticism that works *with* this "spirit of eclecticism" will be as eclectic as the poetry itself. Antithetical to critical approaches that homogenise poetry with unifying frameworks, this study advocates multiple critical approaches. Working respectfully in relation and in conversation with new nineties poets, the eclectic critical engagements of this thesis are connected by the equally eclectic theories of postmodernism.

## CERTIFICIATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

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Signature of Candidate                              Date

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Signature of Supervisor/s                           Date

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

Australia's poetry milieu was enlivened in the 1990s by the emergence of a number of new poets and their eclectic poetry. These new poets include Alison Croggon[1], Rebecca Edwards[2], Peter Minter[3], John Mateer[4], Emma Lew[5], Jordie Albiston[6], Peter Boyle[7], Lisa Bellear[8], Marcella Polain[9], Anita Heiss[10], MTC Cronin[11], Tracy Ryan[12], Samuel Wagan Watson[13], Jill Jones[14], Cassie Lewis[15], Adrian Wiggins[16], Jennifer Compton[17], Jean Kent[18], Brett Dionysius[19], Aileen Kelly[20], Brook Emery[21], Ian McBryde[22], Michelle Taylor[23], Michael Farrell[24], Lucy Dougan[25], Sarah Attfield[26], Kevin Murray[27], Deb Westbury[28], Jane Gibian[29], Coral Hull[30], John Graham[31], Jennifer Harrison[32], Ouyang Yu[33], John Muk Muk Burke[34], Keri Glastonbury[35], Mark Reid[36], Zan Ross[37], Kevin Brophy[38], Cath Kenneally[39], Gina Mercer[40], Ted Nielsen[41], Lauren Williams[42], Andy Kissane[43], Michael Heald[44], David Herkt[45], Brendan Ryan[46], Louis de Paor[47] and others. This study groups these poets together under the general title of 'new nineties poets and poetries' which refers to poetry written for the page by poets who published their first collection between 1990 and 2000 and who continue to write into the twenty-first century.

## Recognition and the Australian Poetry Milieu

Many of these poets have been recognised with awards for first collections, and demonstrative of greater renown is the bestowment of awards which consider *all* Australian poetry, like the prestigious *Age* Book of the Year award and the various Premiers' awards. These new poets receive a substantial amount of publication space and attention in Australia's leading literary journals, as well as being reviewed in journals and newspapers both in Australia and overseas. Their poetry is included in numerous anthologies and they now occupy authoritative and influential positions as editors and reviewers.

Those who have won the Mary Gilmore award for a first book of poetry since 1990 include Alison Croggon, Jean Kent, Morgan Yasbincek, Jordie Albiston, Aileen Kelly, Jill Jones, Emma Lew, and Lucy Dougan. The FAW Anne Elder award for a first book of poetry since 1990 has been awarded to Alison Croggon and Marcella Polain. Those who have won state awards include Emma Lew, John Mateer, Peter Boyle, Sam Wagan Watson, Coral Hull, Tracy Ryan, Jill Jones, Brett Dionysius, Brook Emery, Mark Reid, Gina Mercer and Andy Kissane. Many of these have won the various national awards including the Bruce Dawe national poetry prize, the Vincent Buckley poetry prize and the Somerset national poetry prize. Indigenous poets Samuel Wagan Watson and John Muk Muk Burke have won the David Unaipon Award and Muk Muk Burke was awarded the Kate Challis RAKA Award, Indigenous Poetry. The *Age* Book of the Year award, the Dinny O'Hearn poetry prize, judged by Gig Ryan, was awarded to Peter Minter for *Empty Texas,* and Emma Lew for her first collection, *The Wild Reply.* (In an unusual alignment, Lew shared the award with one of Australia's most esteemed and established poets, Peter Porter.) Most of the new nineties poets have been guests at Australia's Writers' Festivals and they have been awarded various grants which enable them to take their poetry to other parts of the world and meet poets from outside Australia.

New nineties poets are published in all of the leading literary journals, including *Meanjin, Overland, HEAT, Australian Book Review, Westerly* and *Southerly.* As well as being reviewed and published in literary journals they receive attention in newspapers including the *Age,* the *Sydney Morning Herald,* the *Australian,* and the *Canberra Times.* Evidence of their wide spread recognition is demonstrated by reviews in international literary journals including *Poetry Review, Stand,* and the newspaper the *Times Literary Supplement.* New nineties poetries are included in the anthologies *New Music* (2001)*, The Best Australian Poems* (2003 & 2004)*, Landbridge* (1999)*, Australian Verse* (1998)*, Calyx* (2000) and *The Best Australian*

*Poetry* (2003 & 2004).  Many of the new nineties poets review their contemporaries but they are also deemed important enough to be reviewed by established poet-critics such as Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Kris Hemmensley, Alan Wearne, John Kinsella, Gig Ryan, Jennifer Maiden and Philip Mead, and respected poetry academics like Ivor Indyk and Martin Duwell.

As well as this acknowledgment and recognition, new nineties poets now occupy positions of influence and are responsible for establishing and maintaining vital networks and publication opportunities.  As poetry editor of *Meanjin* (2000 to 2005), Peter Minter has occupied one of the most influential positions of all the new nineties poets. Similarly, his role as co-editor (with Michael Brennan) of the anthology *Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets* (2000) was a rare opportunity for such relatively 'new' or 'unestablished' poets.  Minter was also awarded the Marten Bequest Travelling Scholarship which enabled him to represent Australia at the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetics (2000), and he is the convenor of the annual Sydney Poetry Seminar at the University of Technology.  Minter was the establishing editor of *Cordite,* Australia's first national poetry tabloid (which continues today as a lively electronic journal at http://www.cordite.org.au/blog/).  Alison Croggon is the (establishing) editor of the electronic journal *Masthead* which began in 1998 as a print journal (four issues), and in 2001 (after a hiatus of two years) recommenced as an annual electronic journal (available at http://www.masthead.net.au/home.html).  Coral Hull is the establishing editor of the electronic journal *Thylazine,* which began in 1996 (available at http://www.thylazine.org/).  Cassie Lewis established and maintained the internet discussion list *Poetry Espresso* from 2000 to 2004.  (Following the cessation of *Poetry Espresso*, Jen Crawford commenced *Poneme* which is available at http://lists.grouse.net.au/mailman/listinfo/poneme.)  Cassie Lewis also publishes

handmade chapbooks under the Poetry Espresso label.  Brett Dionysius and Melissa Ashley directed *Subverse: Queensland Poetry Festival* (1997-2001) and Dionysius, with Paul Hardacre and Marissa Newell, established *Papertiger,* a CDROM poetry journal (2001) (available at http://www.papertigermedia.com/about/default.htm).  Rebecca Edwards has been interviewed by Julie McCrossin for the ABC radio program, *Life Matters.* John Mateer's critical articles are frequently published in *Australian Book Review* and he is a regular reviewer for the magazine; he has also been interviewed for ABC radio in relation to his poetry and his experiences and writings on Indonesia.  All of these activities and others place new nineties poets at the centre of what has become a thriving poetry milieu.  The internet enables new nineties poets to regularly communicate with each other, and poets from all over the globe; it enables them to electronically publish their poetry and it is an ever-expanding forum in which new nineties poets have an influential role.

### Eclectic Assemblage: 'Schools' Out/ Diversity In

In many ways the dates 1990 to 2000 are arbitrary and there is no real reason why poets who published their first collection in the five or so years prior to 1990, like Adam Aitken and Dipti Saravanamuttu, and poets who published their first collection in the five or so years after 2000, like Bronwyn Lea, Kate Fagan, Michael Brennan and Geraldine McKenzie, could not be included in this study.  Chapbooks or pamphlets produce a minor dilemma for cut-off periods, but included as new nineties poets are those who published a chapbook prior to 1990 (David Herkt) and a chapbook during the decade but a collection at the end of the decade (Cassie Lewis).  The dates 1990 to 2000 are flexible rather than definitive: they establish a necessary limit for the field of study and attend to the emergence of a variety of new poetic 'voices' in the Australian poetry milieu at the end of the twentieth century.  Throughout this study, new nineties poetries

refs to an eclectic assemblage of poets and their heterogeneous practices. The 1990s, as Ann Vickery argues, is a "field of poetry which is marked more than anything else by its difference, and which explodes the usefulness of categories such as 'Language poetry' or 'new Australian poetry' which arose in the 1970s to denote certain counter movements or tendencies" (*Salt* 127).

Rather than divide new nineties poets into 'schools' or 'movements' it is more appropriate to emphasise the "spirit of eclecticism", as John Leonard describes it (*New Music* xv), that characterises the contemporary poetry milieu. This 'spirit' is an attitude towards difference: new nineties poets acknowledge, accept and at times celebrate the diverse range of poetic practices of their contemporaries. They have not sought to establish 'schools' or 'movements' of poets and they do not use an oppositional rhetoric that divides poets into 'warring' factions. As part of the research for this study I met as many new nineties poets as possible and found that they did not define themselves nor did they want to be defined as part of a 'school' or 'movement'. On the contrary, new nineties poets are interested in a larger and more encompassing type of poetry 'community'. During my research, Sarah Attfield was the only new nineties poet who identified herself as belonging to a movement or group. In response to a negative review of her poetry, Attfield identified herself as a "working class poet" (*Overland* 81). This identification positions Attfield within the long and firmly established history of the working class in all areas of culture and society. Although important, this identification is unlike the strategy used by new poets to identify or establish a new 'revolutionary' school and is thus not analogous to those types of divisions.

My use of the term 'community' is intended in the most general sense possible and I use it sparingly in preference for the term 'milieu'. Theoretical and philosophical debate

about what 'community' means in our postmodern world is a contentious and hotly debated topic (Bauman, Nancy, Agamben, Bataille, Vattimo) and even cautious use of the term is problematic. Frequently, postmodern theorists conceptualise community in negative terms, accusing it of colonising "social space" and demonstrating a "sinister and but thinly masked tendency to aggression and intolerance" (Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* 235). In contrast, 'milieu' is free of these connotations and signifies *environment*. That is, vital to this thesis is the environment of new nineties poetries which is permeated or characterised by a 'spirit of eclecticism'. Unlike the impetus towards 'poetry school' building which conventionally relies upon authoritative pronouncements defining the 'New Revolutionary School', one cannot expect to find new nineties poets authoritatively pronouncing the emergence of an 'eclectic community' or 'eclectic milieu'. However, a minor discussion on Poetry Espresso (at the time it was called Poetics) dealt with the topic of 'communities', and new nineties poets Cassie Lewis and Peter Minter offered their thoughts on the type of poetry 'community' they desire/belong to. Cassie Lewis' sense of 'community' is "a group with a broad set of shared beliefs, i.e. poetry is worthwhile and should be supported and encouraged and challenged" ("Re: Don't mess with the press." Online Posting to Poetics." 3 Aug. 2000). Peter Minter commented that his idea of a poetry community is one that is consciously "respectful" of all poets working in Australia. Specifically, it is Deleuzian in that it is a "rhizomatic community of poets" which suggests (among other things) that it is dynamic/ever-changing/flexible, it is non-hierarchical/unstratified/deterritorialized, it is multiple/plural (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*) (Online posting to Poetics, "Re: Paperclip or Trombone?" 3 Aug. 2000). For Minter a sense of community is created because of "our collective commitment to 'poetry', 'good work', 'good criticism'" (Online posting to Poetics. 3 Aug. 2000.) This general and inclusive sense of community is comprised of all those who are interested in poetry; it includes those who write and read poetry, those who write about

poetry and those who publish poetry. The connecting factor is a passion for poetry and this passion should not be negated by differences. In part, this loosely defined sense of community can be understood as arising in response to the ever-diminishing public audience for poetry. That is, given the situation that poetry is read by so few, new nineties poets are 'banding together' for the 'common cause' of poetry.

Placed within the historical context of Australian poetry, this loose sense of 'community' and the interconnected impetus to thwart categorisation and division, can be understood as a desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past. To date Australia's poets have frequently divided themselves and have been divided by critics into warring 'camps', 'factions', 'schools' or 'movements'. Whether belonging to the Vision group (led by Norman Lindsay in the 1920s), the Jindyworobaks (lead by Rex Ingamells in the 1930s), the Angry Penguins (presented in the *Angry Penguins* journal, edited by Max Harris and attacked in the Ern Malley hoax by McAuley and Stewart, 1944) or the Generation of '68, Australian poets and their critics have consistently claimed the superiority of one type of poetry and one group of poets over another. For new nineties poets the ways of the past are no longer appropriate and they are antipathetic to their efforts to work together in difference and avoid the damaging divisions of 'schools' or 'movements'. The problems inherent in the formation of a 'school' of poets are many, including canonisation and critical attention on a few poets while many are ignored and excluded, publication opportunities are usurped by the 'favoured few' and diversity is homogenised (this is a problem for those within the 'school').

These different processes are signs of one of the important differences between modernism and postmodernism: the establishment of poetry 'schools' is characteristic of modernism or modernity, whereas a spirit of eclecticism and the desire not to establish

'schools' is a defining axiom of postmodernism. The shift from 'poetry school' to 'a spirit of eclecticism' involves the shift from liberal humanism (modernity) to an ethics of difference (postmodern). It is a shift from 'togetherness-in-common' to 'togetherness-in-difference'. Producing poetry 'schools' relies upon unifying all those who share something: whether they are poetic practices or political positions, unity and a form of homogeneity are called for. 'School' formation and its resulting factionalism also rely upon an oppositional attitude in which 'we' stand against the 'others'. For example, Tranter's introduction to the 'school' forming anthology of the 'Generation of '68', *New Australian Poetry* (1979), unites its members by their

> struggle for freedom from conscription (we were at war with North Vietnam at the time), freedom from censorship and police harassment, freedom to experiment with drugs, to develop a sexual ethic liberated from authoritarian restraints, and freedom from the handcuffs of rhyme and the critical strictures of the university English departments (xvii).

The 'others' of this opposition include those with authority, including the 'conservative' and established poets. However, it also instigated a division between its members and their contemporaries (and the 'anthology wars' commenced). The establishment of a 'school' often asserts a hierarchical structure which places the 'school' at the top of that power structure and all others in inferior positions. Postmodernism exposes and subverts these "hierarchies of power" (Bertens, "The Debate on Postmodernism" 6). The "postmodern impulse" not to produce poetry 'schools' involves the insistence "on difference and declaring war on sameness in the name of intellectual, moral, and political freedom" (Bertens "The Debate on Postmodernism" 3). It is marked by the acknowledgment, acceptance and at times celebration of difference. There is no desire to unite under the banner of 'the same' or bond against 'others'; heterogeneity/difference/eclecticism is the postmodern condition and the postmodern attitude towards this condition is one of acceptance. This postmodern shift needs to be

"understood as a condition connecting ethics and aesthetics" (McCorkle 46). The 'spirit of eclecticism' defines an ethical attitude towards those who are different and translated into the realm of aesthetics it is an attitude towards different poetic practices. McCorkle discusses this postmodern poetics in relation to Auschwitz and Hiroshima (46). It involves "an ongoing reinterpretation of the self in the context of others"; the "self-critical capacity of language and its relationship with identity"; and the necessity "to respond to the particular" and the "specific" (Eagleton paraphrasing Adorno in McCorkle 46).

Various commentators have noticed the emergence of poets who are not interested in dividing themselves into schools. For example, MacKenzie Wark in the *Australian* ruminates on the "upsurge" of new poetry after attending a session at the Sydney Writers' Festival and concludes that "[d]ifferences in communications might stand as a way of summing up the new aesthetic in Australian poetry". Wark comments on the poetry read by Peter Minter, Michael Brennan, Kate Lilly, Kate Fagan, MTC Cronin, and notes the shift from factions to communication:

> Australian poetry always struck me as an intensely factional world. This is what was revealing about Minter's reluctance to make any aesthetic statement on anyone's behalf other than his own. Rather than warring factions, poetry now seems more like a network of peculiarities. Perhaps that's fitting in a world without a given moral order, in which all is a chaotic fluctuating world of grey and silver.

Commenting on the anthology edited by John Kinsella, *Landbridge*, Wark suggests that "there's a striking broad approach to taste implied in Kinsella's selection" and notes that "rather than see poetry in terms of the opposition of this understanding of poetics to that, what matters is to put differences in communication". The "change" Wark is pinpointing is not a new or "particular style of poetry", it is a "style of co-existence between poetics". Similarly, new nineties poet Tracy Ryan tellingly entitled her *Westerly*

review of new poetry, "No Camps or Movements: Recent Poetry" (Ryan's review included new nineties poets Andy Kissane, Mark Reid, Cath Kenneally, Kevin Murray, Deb Westbury, Jennifer Harrison). Ryan states that none of the books reviewed can "be grouped into anything like 'camps' or 'movements'" (78); rather her review discusses the diverse range of concerns and approaches of recently published poetry collections.

### Anthologies

Historically, anthologies have played an important role in the establishment of 'schools' or the creation of divisions amongst poets, but to date new nineties poets have not been anthologised with the unifying intent of Tranter's *New Australian Poetry* or Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott's *New Impulses in Australian Poetry*. Anthologies have featured new nineties poetry alongside poetry written by various other Australian poets from various other periods. John Leonard's anthologies reveal an interesting positioning of new nineties poets because he organises his selection according to the birth date of the poets. Thus, in the anthologies *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology* (1998) and *New Music: An Anthology of Contemporary Australian Poetry* (2001), new nineties poets feature on the first pages. *Australian Verse* commences with the poetry of new nineties poets Rebecca Edwards, Coral Hull, Alison Croggon, Emma Lew, Jordie Albiston, and concludes with poetry written in the nineteenth century by Charles Harpur, Louisa Anne Meredith, Robert Lowe and Barron Field. As an anthology of contemporary poetry covering the period 1990 to 2000, *New Music* does not cover such a wide historical breadth as *Australian Verse* but again it positions new nineties poets alongside other poets. It features many new nineties poets, including Alison Croggon, Rebecca Edwards, Peter Minter, John Mateer and Emma Lew, and of the established poets it includes Robert Adamson, Les Murray, Rosemary Dobson and many more. John Kinsella's anthology of contemporary poetry, *Landbridge* (1999), similarly positions new nineties poets alongside

their contemporaries: Lisa Bellear, Peter Boyle, Alison Croggon, MTC Cronin, Coral Hull, Peter Minter, and Tracy Ryan are featured with John Tranter, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Fay Zwicky and other established poets. The series of anthologies *The Best Australian Poetry* (Duwell and Lea; Lawrence; Beveridge; Porter; Tranter) and *The Best Australian Poems* (Murray; Craven; Dorothy Porter; Rose) feature many new nineties poets including Jordie Albiston, Lucy Alexander, Peter Boyle, Jennifer Compton, MTC Cronin, Lucy Dougan, Michael Farrell, Jennifer Harrison, Michael Heald, Judy Johnson, Aileen Kelly, Andy Kissane, Emma Lew, Cassie Lewis, John Mateer, Ian McBryde, Peter Minter, Brendan Ryan, Sam Wagan Watson, Lauren Williams and Morgan Yasbincek.

*New Music*

John Leonard's anthology *New Music: An Anthology of Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Five Islands Press 2001) spans the decade 1990 to 2000 and the introduction emphasises the eclecticism of new poetry and the absence of a cohesive 'school'. Leonard acknowledges that a "clear, swift, generational change has come about very recently", but emphasises that "[t]here is no cult of youth about" because it includes "poets from their twenties to their early forties (or so)" (xiv). Of the lively poetry milieu, Leonard comments that these new poets write with "confidence" and "a strong awareness of each other's published work, and mostly organize the public readings" (xiv). Most importantly, Leonard emphasises that "the new poets evade categorization" and acknowledges that "[t]here are groups, but *none claiming to be a pre-eminent new movement*" (emphasis added xv). Certainly there are groups of poets who write in similar styles and there are groups and communities of poets who are good friends, but none of these want to define themselves or others as a 'movement', 'school' or even 'group', nor do they want to be defined in this way.

*Calyx*

If there was an opportunity to produce a 'school' or 'movement' forming anthology,

*Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets* edited by Peter Minter and Michael Brennan

provided that moment. (Michael Brennan is not 'technically' a new nineties poet as he

published his first collection *Imageless World* in 2004.) However, in the introduction

Minter and Brennan explicitly address this issue and state that they are opposed to such

a strategy. The impetus for *Calyx* was not the need to establish themselves, their

friends and like-minded new poets as a 'new school' of poets, it was the enlivened

poetry milieu of the 1990s. Capturing an aspect of that milieu, and their roles in

energising it, Minter and Brennan's introduction explains their intentions:

> The idea for this anthology came about early in 1998. During the mid-1990s we
> both helped establish poetry magazines, broadsheets and readings, mostly based
> in Sydney but also engaging with other writers and editors living and publishing
> elsewhere. *Avernus,* the *Varuna New Poetry* broadsheets and *Cordite Poetry* and
> *Poetry Review,* launched between 1994-1996, generated unique spaces for the
> publication of Australian poetry and dialogue about it, and presented to
> Australian and international readers material by a range of new poets whose
> work remains energetic and significant. (12)

Although their initial focus was to "collect work by poets we had recently published or

encountered creatively", they "broadened" their "scope to include other poets who also

started publishing widely in the 1990s" (12). The anthology is "importantly, not

definitive" and Minter and Brennan consciously "look[ed] beyond predictable

alignments or a desire to demarcate an exclusive, generational poetic" (13). In contrast

to establishing a 'school' or 'movement', they suggest that

> the poets gathered here represent what could be termed a recombinant poetics,
> a leaning toward respectful interactions and hybridisations in methods and
> design, and the application of what is learned to specific cultural and material
> conditions (13).

It is the editors' intention that *Calyx* "draws together a number of new meetings and

conversations in Australian poetry, explores other conversations which have happened

to constellate around them" (12). In contrast to the combative rhetoric of the poetry

'wars' of the past, which set the traditionalists against the modernists (as in the Ern Malley controversy) or the radicals against the conservatives (as in the 'Generation of '68'), this opportunity to establish a 'school' is used to combine eclectic poetries and celebrate differences.

Minter's comments about *Calyx* on Poetry Espresso/Poetics acknowledges the limitations of an anthology and the impossibility of including every poet, but he emphasises the sense of community that exists:

> It's a big conversation we're embarking on, together, as poets here, and I sincerely hope that Calyx will become part of that. Like any conversation tho its both listening and speaking, interruptive, "completely partial" in its processes of simultaneously grounding and liberating possibilities for encounter…
>
> . . .
>
> I like the etymology of 'anthology', its resonance around a seasonal selection of flowers. & I think it would be great for us to have Numerous anthologies rather than Canonical. I've found its really impossible, with all the spatial and economic limitations of the production process, to seek to represent 'everybody' or 'everything', and look forward to the continued efflorescence of more anthologies & special supplements such that finer gradations of different textualities can be read to form a constellation of spaces, matrixially. ("Re: Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets." Online posting. 11 Aug. 2000. Poetics)

With an attitude that celebrates multiplicity – the more anthologies the better! – Minter concludes by encouraging other new poets to produce anthologies. In contrast to the environment of the past which saw anthologies competing with each other in a 'war' for supremacy, Minter depicts *Calyx* and the anthologies yet to be produced as working together and participating in the "big conversation" of the contemporary poetry milieu.

Despite this explicit call for the acknowledgment of the diversity of new poetry and the need to "look beyond predictable alignments or a desire to demarcate an exclusive, generational poetic", two reviews of *Calyx* (both in newspapers of a wide general

readership and thus reaching a public audience) present it as "programmatic" (McCooey, "Strange Messages" 1) and producing "the Calyx School" (Kinsella, "Poets Cornered" 3). In his *Age* review McCooey suggests that the anthology's programmatic character may arise "because much of the material comes from the publications that they [Minter and Brennan] have been involved in editorially (*Avernus,* the Varuna New Poetry broadsheets, and *Cordite*) (1)". McCooey does not elaborate on what he means by "programmatic", but he assumedly means that the anthology follows a narrow 'school' type agenda. Certainly many of the poets in *Calyx* have been included in these journals and have had collections published by Brennan's Vagabond Press (which he co-directs with Jane Gibian), but these publications reveal an eclectic array of poetries not a limited 'school' of poets. For example, two new nineties poets published by Vagabond Press are Zan Ross and Tracy Ryan. Their poems included in *Calyx* demonstrate diversity, not a programmatic agenda. Ross' "Lose My Senses" is an anti-romantic, humorous, ironic, self-mocking poem that playfully makes use of colloquialisms and clichés, and is set within the culture of musicals and film.

> Your declined Latinate face, contoured to fit
> *Tall, dark and handsome*–Strictly Ballroom;
> what my mother swore represents
> desire, but
> *turn me loose, let me straddle in the saddle underneath a*
> *Western sky,* Gary Cooper tall, blond rangy, Scandinavian
> skull-and-cross-boned
> Cowboys in chaps, legs curved to accommodate
> *Don't fence me in.*
> With you
> it's perpetual Fred and Ginger, 1947 post-
> carnage Bogart short-
> shrift Bullets, licorice
> oral (*don't forget to floss*) on my knees 'til
> my eyes bulge.
> You think
> I should be Ginger sugar-and-spice georgette swirl, *two scoops,*
> *please* sweet, legs over my head, ankle-strap tap and
> choreographed bonk, absolutely no
> sweat.    Listen,
> I'm not

*that* Musical-more like **Oklahoma** meets **Blue
Velvet.**   Just
off the frame     someone lights a rollie, blows
smoke across and begins to tell a story about     *How
the West was Manifest Destiny, wind whooping down the plains*
punctuated by shots
of Native Americans and Buffalo Soldiers-
put    THAT   in you pipe and smoke it; show it to
Custer, see if he cares.   You
already know about me:
I like spurs. (250-251)

The poem concludes on a serious note, but shares little with the seriousness of Tracy

Ryan's "Holywell".  Ryan's poem commences

> *to the memory of John Forbes*
>
> > *I did say yes
> > O at lightning and lashed rod;
> > Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
> > Thy terror, O Christ, O God*
> > Gerard Manly Hopkins
>
> Just inland from a littered coast
> Cold as Dante's core of ice that
> Signifies blank absence, God's
> Presence likewise. Mute, implacable.
> Somewhere within this pool, a source.
> We take the scored-in thanks
> For vandal's curse, stripped
> Of hung crutches this minimalist
> Dumb-show of faith.
> Where the head rolled lopped from
> The body, a cold world sprang up.
> Restored, she fingers
> His ring at the throat, a slipped
> And welded halo. Pale earnest.
> One snip and the chin droops,
> Beauty in dis-torsion:
> Swivel-top, doll-bottle
> Of bath salts. White heal-all.
> Pick-a-back like Christopher,
> The penny drops.
> I did say yes,
> No, maybe, could you run that by me
> Over again I feel thy finger
> Licked and drawn at the neck,
> Fond threat.
> Down there I wasn't aware
> Except for a pang after bathing,

> Yes, Mother, I did say yes. (261-262)

The poem concludes with the female speaker angrily lamenting: "She is vestigial, / Virginal. I was this in another life." Unlike Ross' poem, this not a playful or ironic poem; it is a deadly serious poem about a relationship of violence, "torture", "filth and passion", rape, and betrayal. It is not surprising that many poets included in the anthology have had poetry included in *Avernus, Varuna New Poetry, Cordite,* and *Meanjin,* and have been published by Vagabond Press, but this is not indicative of a limited programme or "predictable alignments or a desire to demarcate an exclusive, generational poetic". It is demonstrative of an emphasis on diversity/eclecticism/hybridity/multiplicity – all "leaning toward respectful interactions".

In conjunction with this comment, McCooey finds the anthology "disappointingly homogenous" (2). In contrast to McCooey's claims, *Calyx* is an eclectic anthology which includes new nineties poets as diverse as Alison Croggon, Emma Lew, Peter Minter, John Mateer and others. The anthology's eclecticism can be demonstrated by the contrasts of the poems. *Calyx* includes Croggon's sensually embodied "Ars Poetica":

> The blue of all the flowers of your body,
> the brain stem, the clitoris, the tongue,
> the wrist vein, the channels of the heart, the dying lips,
> reaching to their likeness in the sky, in the sky's waters-
> you can't lift it out of your flesh
> because it won't exist, but it flowers past you. (102)

which can be contrasted with Minter's post-language innovations of "Lust":

> & sucking up glass channels     he says     If only people knew what was
>      going on
> in my mind
>          again
>
> oysters slice open currents, foam out the reverb,
>                          Trojan Horse
>              (not wanting to destroy De Fort
>                                      just sits there like any other code,
> all oak splinters & hydro effluvia, concept & drainage

<div style="text-align: center;">the cork floats on and on (217).</div>

Emma Lew's dark and mysterious anti-narrative "Marshes":

> They speak of stridency and of nothingness
> and wrap up their shoulders in grey light.
> I want to walk again in this miry place.
> I want the fever and fret beneath, though
> it's something I forget, like pain. (173)

contrasts with John Mateer's complex engagement with a hybrid sense of self in "Dark Horse":

> As I write this line
> the line 'I do not speak in my own language' is in my head
> like the line of an ascending aeroplane piercing through cloud.
>
> But I must tell (who?)-
>
> *Beware of those bearing grief in comprehensible words.*
> *Beware of your mouths.* (197)

Criticism which attempts to join these disparate poetries together with a unifying label can only do so at the exclusion of differences like Croggon's radical introduction of the female body into poetry and the way she combines this with what is often referred to as a 'high' style of poetic language; Minter's engagement with American Language poetry and his elliptical linguistic playfulness; Lew's narratives which provide few informative details; and Mateer's commitment to probing the ownership of language.

More programmatic than *Calyx* is McCooey's approach to new nineties poetries in his chapter "Contemporary poetry: across party lines", in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000). Here new nineties poets Alison Croggon, Coral Hull and John Mateer join Gig Ryan, John Kinsella, Anthony Lawrence and Adam Aitken under the label of the "post Generation of '68 (or '79)" (167) as evidence of the "continuities" (167) of the "Generation of '79", defined by McCooey as "Tranter, Forbes, Laurie Duggan, Alan Wearne and John A. Scott" (164). As members of the post Generation of

'68 or '79, these new nineties poets continue the "romanticism" of the Generation of '79 (which for this programmatic reading does not include Tranter, 166). Hull is the only new nineties poet specifically discussed, but as a group these poets supposedly share an interest in violence in poetry. Certainly there is violence in Hull and Mateer's poetry, but it is an inconsequential issue in Croggon's poetry. Most importantly, Emma Lew's poetry, the most violent poetry of the contemporary milieu, is not mentioned here. Generational approaches are necessarily programmatic and can only present a limited picture of the contemporary poetry milieu. McCooey acknowledges the limitations of this generational approach, both explicitly in his conclusion ("The emphasis in this chapter on Generations of '68 and '79 may seem tendentious" 179) and implicitly by only making use of it in the beginning of the chapter.

John Kinsella's discussion of *Calyx* in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is more divisive and less in accordance with Minter and Brennan's editorial intentions because it claims that there is a "Calyx school" and "the genesis of a new poetry war . . . emanates from Sydney" (technically this is not a review of *Calyx*) (3). This article is wide-ranging and covers many topics relating to Australian poetry (in particular Kinsella's concept of "international regionalism"), which at times makes it difficult to follow and ascertain the main point of the article. For example, it seems contradictory to claim the above but then celebrate the Australian poetry milieu because it is "eclectic, diverse and fragmentary" (1). Similarly, Kinsella claims that the 'new poetry wars' are just like the previous ones, "[t]he so-called Australian poetry wars of the seventies and eighties largely stemmed from this insecurity [of "its identity angst"] and the new tensions have much to do with it" (1), and yet "things are dramatically changing here in Australia" (2). During the email discussions on Poetry Espresso (moderated by new nineties poet Cassie Lewis) and Poetryetc (moderated by Kinsella), which were stimulated by the

article, Kinsella stated that he was not trying to create the Calyx school, but he was

"attempting to recognise . . . something particularly vibrant":

> I talked about 'community'. about communities of conversation really. not group in the way the movement worked. minter, brennan, fagan, armand (outside sydney) etc - there are conversations going on there, and out there, that have interesting implications for poetic discourse in australia and elsewhere. and of course there are many interactions/dialogues in sydney etc. i highlighted one that I believe will develop into a dialogue with 'external' spaces. " (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 5 Feb. 2001)

(Because Brennan and Fagan's first collections were published after 2000 they are not

technically 'new nineties poets': Brennan's first collection *Imageless World* was published

in 2004, and Fagan's first collection *The Long Moment* was published in 2002.) The

distinction here between 'group', 'movement' and 'community' is a slippery one and the

focus on a few poets to the exclusion of many is not productive of 'conversation'

between communities nor is it productive of creating conversations that lead to

communities. Kinsella's article is not about communities in conversation; it is about one

community he calls the 'Calyx school'.


Other Australian poets did not interpret Kinsella's article as promoting community.

Joanne Burns obviously did not feel included in the so-called community making of the

article:

> john..... how do the following statements from your article 'promote' community......
>
> 'Australian poets don't need an industry, they need to recognise that difference is desirable. I often wonder what poets read when they get home at night; there is so much animosity between poets here that I doubt they even glance at the work of other Australian writers.'
>
> I found the presumptions here rather offensive and disappointing... (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 6 Feb. 2001)

And new nineties poet Jill Jones' email presents her concerns about the camp creating

ramifications of the article:

I am uneasy about these 'camps' and 'communities' that seem to being 'set up' (I use the term deliberately) in the article. I don't think it reflects the myriad inter-linkings at various levels that I am aware of, say, in Sydney and elsewhere - and, remember, this just little ol' me here, there'll be many more besides. I know a number of people whose work appears in that anthology - at least one I am quite close to in age and publishing history and we have critiqued each other's manuscripts (a process which is often never discussed or considered) and exchanged any number of ideas. This person's work is as close to other groups in Sydney (and elsewhere) that would never fit the neat categories set up by any anthology or article.

Look, I hope this isn't a shocking notion to people out there but all sorts of poets talk to and share ideas with all sorts of other poets in Sydney (and elsewhere, some of my closest poet friends have been outside Sydney). Most people don't give a rats about the old poetry wars - we just get on with it. I meet regularly with one group of people to talk about poetry etc and I think it might be surprising to some as to who those people are. According to the 'rules of engagement' this shouldn't happen. Perhaps we should be meeting in secret and swallowing any papers that pass between us - so 'no names no pack drill'. (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 6 Feb. 2001)

The discussion provides valuable insight into what happens when a 'school' is created. Jones' comments emphasise that 'movement making' generally or the formation of a 'Calyx school' specifically, draws attention to a few poets and presents them as the only ones worthy of attention therefore excluding others; it erroneously portrays the way poets work and it erroneously pigeonholes poets. As Jones suggests, these concerns are not only relevant to the poetry community in Australia for Kinsella's article has international implications which disadvantage poets not in his so-called 'Calyx school':

But now that the article has gone international there are people out there who may get the idea that Sydney belongs to one small group, or that the only poets in Australia worth reading are in this or that anthology. It just isn't so, John, and I'm sure everyone, including said 'group', would agree. I would hope you do too. There are other things happening here and if it doesn't see the light of day in the approved circles doesn't mean it isn't happening or that it isn't influential or won't become influential. (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 6 Feb. 2001)

Jones' comments indicate that the general atmosphere of the contemporary poetry community is not one of divisions and 'schools'. Her comment that the members of the so-called 'Calyx school' would agree that there is poetry worthy of attention which is *not*

in the anthology, reflects Minter and Brennan's editorial intentions (as stated in the introduction of *Calyx)* and reveals a sense of trust in the poetry community. Ironically, this trust is something that Minter and Brennan's introduction to *Calyx* explicitly attempts to invoke.

As an active member of both email discussions groups, I asked Kinsella about the article and in particular the problems inherent in 'naming' a Calyx school, and the danger of creating a poetry war by claiming that there is one (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 6 Feb. 2001). In response, Kinsella opposed the idea that an article making this claim could help produce a poetry war:

> the article 'recognises' divisions - and i'm afraid they are there. but it 'promotes' community. not all poets like the idea of community, or at least those that don't fit their agendas. it is always time for different ways of talking. newspapers don't seem to work in that way though. email lists can, and often do - this is part of the same conversation, just different in its spatiality. so. maybe newspapers can 'connect' through this and become something else in the process.
>
> the article can't spark a 'war' if there's no one to fight the battles...but there are lines of thought that occasionally clash. it is not asking for conflict - quite the opposite. however, in the world of prize culture things polarise pretty quickly. which is unfortunate.
>
> what i am arguing subtextually, is that much dialogue in australian poetry is the slave of an incipient (and overt) nationalism and parochialism (as opposed to 'regionalism').. this i find worrying. (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 6 Feb. 2001)

And in another email Kinsella emphasised that there are divisions in the contemporary poetry community and all is not as harmonious as some think:

> the 'war' is not my construct - comes from hearing some pretty interesting (and uninteresting) conversations. it is also ironised within the construct of the 'anthology poetry wars'. the piece itself should have some internal dialogue happening - it is talking with its own means of production as much as 'from' or 'to'. if paperbark hadn't picked up peter minter, michael brennan etc., the landscape would be far more oppressive. for many many years alternative poetries have been kept out of 'commercial' publishing. they haven't been distributed. that's a 'cold war' in this context. it's not as polite as it all seems i'm afraid. (Online posting to Poetryetc. "Re: A caution." 6 Feb. 2001)

Certainly, to emphasise the eclecticism of new nineties poetries, attend to the ways the poets acknowledge these differences and the ways they have not attempted to stratify themselves into 'schools' does not preclude the acknowledgment of tensions. However, to characterise the poetry milieu as dominated by factions, as I believe Kinsella's article does, is not only inaccurate it actively participates in establishing those tensions and helps produce the so-called 'poetry wars'.

Emphasising the eclecticism of new nineties poetries, avoiding "predictable alignments or a desire to demarcate an exclusive, generational poetic", and explicitly thwarting conventional 'school' forming strategies, does not preclude the acknowledgment of tensions and divisions. Tensions and divisions exist, but they do not *dominate* the poetry community nor are most new nineties poets using opportunities to produce 'schools'. However, as the following demonstrates, serious tensions arise in the poetry milieu when a poet receives a negative review. When Alison Croggon negatively reviewed Lauren Williams' *Invisible Tattoo* in *Australian Book Review* a heated discussion on Poetryetc ensued (Lyndon Walker's *So Many Rivers, So Much To Learn: Poems 1984-2000* is also negatively reviewed in this article, but comments will be confined to Williams as she is a new nineties poet.) Hugh Tolhurst commenced the discussion because he believed that Croggon was "too damning of the Lauren Williams book" (Online posting to Poetryetc. 20 Nov. 2000) and it was an 'unfair' review. Tolhurst felt that Croggon "mauled" the book, and was concerned that Williams would be "mortified" (Online posting to Poetryetc. 18 Nov. 2000). The review is certainly damning: Croggon asserts that Williams' poetry is part of the "dreadful orthodoxy" that claims to be free verse but is "in fact, anything but free verse" (53) and scathingly concludes that "[f]ailure is not possible, because so little is being attempted" (54). Croggon reaches these conclusions, in part, because her expectations of poetry are dissimilar to Williams'

expectations. For Croggon poems "matter. . .because of their beauty, intelligence, passion, vitality, excitement", and although she acknowledges the impossibility of assessing such qualities, of attempting to "measure the measureless, or define the indefinable" (53), her review applies this criteria to Williams' poetry. Problems arise because these are not the qualities that matter to Williams, or put another way, Williams' concepts of 'beauty, intelligence, passion, vitality, excitement' in poetry, are different from Croggon's. Williams is a poet of the 'everyday' and uses language of the everyday; Croggon is a philosophical poet and uses a highly wrought poetic language. It is evident that Croggon is aware of the type of poetics Williams works within for she suggests that the collection

> recalls a lesser Jo Shapcott. The poems have a lightness of touch which, intelligently honed, could make perfectly unexceptionable, inoffensive poetry: a poetry paying attention in plain language to ordinary moments, which seeks the public rather than the inner ear.

> Is that enough? If her tools were sharper, it might be. (53)

However, these comments also reveal that Croggon is not impressed by poetry that works in this mode, because even if the poetry were "intelligently honed" its greatest achievement would still be "unexceptionable" and "inoffensive". Croggon does not write poetry that has a "lightness of touch", use "plain language", or deal with "ordinary moments" that are aimed at the public ear. Croggon's poetry is philosophically attuned to matters concerning the relationship between the body and writing and the insignificance of Being, her language is highly charged and poetically lyrical, and it is poetry that demands private and thoughtful reading. For Croggon, poetic language should strive to push language to its limits and be involved in a "thorough smashing of language itself" (52). According to this criteria, Williams' poetic language is lacking because it is "so unaware of itself [it] cannot avoid complacency" (53), but a poet of the everyday, like Williams, strives to make language *seem* unaware of

itself and one might say *that* is the 'beauty' of such poetry.  The heated discussion on Poetryetc continued for a number of days.  It stimulated a radio programme on 3RRR which discussed Croggon's review and Willliams' *Invisible Tattoos* (Tolhurst. Online posting to Poetryetc. 24 Nov. 2000).  (3RRR is a community radio station; the programme on which the discussion took place was Aural Texts, compared by Alicia Sometimes on 29 Nov. 2000.)  It also stimulated an *Overland* article by Lauren Williams which divided poets into groups of 'inclusives' and 'exclusives' according to the type of language they used (untitled article issue number.165, 70-72).

The conclusion and outcome of this review were predetermined by the poets involved and anyone knowing anything about the poets and poetry involved would be aware of this incongruity.  That is, there are few poets more different than Williams and Croggon: Williams is a poet of the 'everyday' and uses language of the everyday; Croggon is a philosophical poet and uses a highly wrought poetic language.  Williams is also a performance poet and many of her poems are written for performance, and although many of Croggon's poems have been 'performed' and used as lyrics in operas, these types of 'performances' are not alike.  Perhaps given these incommensurable differences, *Australian Book Review* should not have commissioned Croggon to write it (it was the first issue after Helen Daniels' death and perhaps all was not running as it should at *ABR*) or perhaps Croggon should have declined to write the review, but there is also another issue at stake in this review.  Croggon's 'agenda' is wider than Williams' poetry and she is concerned that "the current diversities of poetic practice" is resulting in the abandonment of "discrimination in favour of a weakly promiscuous 'supportiveness'" (53).  This position is clarified in relation to Kinsella's article, which is, according to Croggon, "correct . . . to highlight a pluralistic vitality in Australian poetry", and attend to the "disagreements" which exist (Online posting to Poetryetc. 6

Feb. 2001).  These "disagreements" are not problematic for the poetry community; they are "a healthy sign" of debate (Online posting to Poetryetc. 6 Feb. 2001).  Even though Croggon acknowledges that she was driven "mulishly underground in the early 90s" due to "pettiness" she sees these tensions as evidence of necessary and important debates.  (The pettiness Croggon is referring to was not related to poetry, but to her role as theatre reviewer for *The Bulletin*.  In this instance, Croggon's negative reviews lead to Carillo Ganter, the director of Playbox, banning her from reviewing Playbox performances.)

As demonstrated by both Croggon and Williams' involvement in the Poetry Against War project, the tensions which arose between Croggon and Williams in November 2000 had dissipated by March 2003.  Croggon was the Australian organiser of Poets Against War and Williams was a contributing poet.  Poets Against War is an international poetry protest against the Iraqi war in which Australian poets united and joined 'forces' with poets all over the world (see http://www.poetsagainstthewar.org/default.asp and a film is available at http://www.voicesinwartime.org/VoicesInWartime/Film/Movie.aspx).  As a form of protest to the Iraqi war, over 120 simultaneous poetry readings were scheduled world-wide on March 5, 2003.  Participating countries included the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, and Mexico.  The original Poets Against War was a protest against the Vietnam War, but not surprisingly without the internet Australian poets were not involved.  (There are two Australian anthologies of anti-war poetry:  *We Took Their Orders and Are Dead* edited Shirley Cass, Ros Cheney, David Malouf and Michael Wilding in 1971 and *Vietnam Voices* a special issue of *Overland* edited by Robert Morrison in 1973.)  The Poets Against War website gives a comprehensive report of the world-wide readings and most importantly it features

reports from the poetry community of new nineties poets, including Alison Croggon,

Jill Jones and Jacinta Le Plastrier Aboukhater.  Of the Sydney reading, it is reported:

> The first reading of the March 5th poets against war around the world was held
> this morning at dawn (6.40am daylight saving time) in Sydney at the (currently,
> and spookily, empty) Pool of Remembrance at the War Memorial in Hyde Park.
> In this symbolic gesture, a small but powerful crowd attended and poems were
> read by poets such as John Bennett, Brook Emery, Jutta Sieveding, Norm
> Newlin, Browyn Rodden and Jills Jones and others (sorry, I didn't get everyone's
> name).  They read either from their own work or from the work of poets as
> diverse as Ivor Gurney, Bruce Beaver and George Oppen.
>
> Afterwards John Bennett and Jill Jones were interviewed on radio 2SER about
> the reading and the anthology of 13,000 anti-war poems to be presented to Prime
> Minister Howard at 2pm today in Canberra.  They both read some poems on air.
> The Australian poems can be read on the Poets Union web site at
> www.poetsunion.com. (http://www.poetsagainstthewar.org/March5reports.asp)

And the Melbourne reading was reported as a great success:

> A very successful public reading was held on March 5 at Linden Gallery, St
> Kilda, as the live Melbourne event to coincide with the international day of poets
> protesting against the Iraqi war.
>
> Poems from the Australian contingent of poems by 119 poets, sent to Mr
> Howard today along with 13,000 other poems collected worldwide, were read at
> the gathering.
>
> Local poets read their own offerings - Alison Croggon (also Australian organiser
> of the Poets Against War submission), Emma Lew, Philip Salom, Dan Spielman,
> Kate Davis and Jacinta Le Plastrier Aboukhater.
>
> Other poets, who didn't submit poems to the protest but who support its
> intentions, such as Michael Farrell and Petra White, read poems included in the
> submission.
>
> Actors Helen Morse, Paul English, Richard Frankland, Aboriginal poet. film-
> maker, writer and activist, and poet/actor Dan Spielman also read poems of
> behalf of poets from interstate, including work by Les Murray, Peter Porter,
> Kevin Hart, Jack Sue Wong, Zoe Croggon (13 years old), Chris Wallace-Crabbe,
> Michael Leunig, Waadeh Sa'adeh, Pat Raison, Geraldine McKenzie and Anna
> Yang (at 10 years, the youngest poet included).
>
> As well as this outstanding poetry, the gathering was read the letter by Croggon
> to Mr Howard, which accompanied the Australian poets' work, a news article on
> Les Murray's personal protest against the war (The Age, 5 March), a comment on
> the poetic spirit in this time of militaristic and propogandist [sic] language by
> Michael Leunig (written specially for the occasion of the reading) and a number

of poems by young Iraqis on the suffering caused by the sanctions against Iraq (in place since 1991).

The reading was also given coverage by The Age, The Melbourne Times/Emerald Hill Times, ABC radio and 3RRR (Michael Leunig's poem was read, along with a discussion of the protest day).

This reading coincided with readings around the world and followed a dawn reading at the war memorial in Sydney.

**Statement to the Prime Minister**

The Rt. Hon. John Howard Parliament House Canberra

March 5, 2003

Dear Mr. Howard

This anthology of poems has been collected in the past five days as a protest against your Government's policies towards the proposed war on Iraq. It is part of a much wider international protest sparked by Sam Hamill, the US poet and publisher, which has gathered 13,000 poems - the largest chorus of poets in history - which are here also presented to you.

It is a testament to the deep concern and alarm that your policies have caused in the wider community that so many poets of such widely differing political beliefs are here gathered in the one cause. These poets represent every section of the Australian poetic community: from well known poets to school children, from the rural to the urban, from conservative to radical political persuasions.

We believe that Australia is a country which desires peace. We believe that Australian troops have no place in the Gulf. We believe that our participation in a pre-emptive war in the Middle East will have disastrous consequences which we and our children will have to live with for years to come - both for the region itself and for our nation in the international community. We do not believe that the world you are currently helping to build will be either more safe or more just.

We believe, Mr. Prime Minister, that you are mistaken. And we urge you to reconsider your policies in the light of the deep and real concerns expressed here, and in the wider Australian community.

Yours faithfully
Alison Croggon On behalf of Poets Against War Australia

Those who submitted poems include new nineties poets Peter Boyle, Alison Croggon, MTC Cronin, Jennifer Harrison, Coral Hull, Jill Jones, Emma Lew, Ian McBride, Peter Minter, Brendan Ryan and Lauren Williams. Many other more recently published poets were involved, such as Kate Fagan, Geraldine MacKenzie, Louise Oxley, as were many established poets such as Robert Adamson, Kevin Hart, John Kinsella, Anthony Lawrence, Les Murray, Judith Rodriguez and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (list available at http://www.poetsunion.com/PoemsAboutWar.htm). Most importantly new nineties poets were involved in the organisation which demonstrates not only their passion for peace but the way they are actively involved in creating a sense of community – not waging 'poetry wars' of mass destruction.

## *The Issues of New Nineties Poetries: Language, Embodiment, Cultural Difference and Violence*

Within the eclecticism of new nineties poetries there are shared concerns and interests focused on issues of language, embodiment, cultural difference, and violence. This thesis defines these issues as the prominent and recurring issues of new nineties poetries and each chapter focuses on one issue. These are not mutually exclusive concerns; some poets engage with all of them while others engage with one or two. The Australian landscape and environmental issues continue to be important for poets but rather than a separate issue-chapter the environment is a recurring topic throughout the thesis.

To discuss these issues I have selected poetry that is *driven* by an engagement with one of these issues and thus focuses on the issue in the most intense way. Language is of course an important issue for all poetry but of all the new nineties poetries Peter Minter's "Empty Texas" series is the most self-reflexive and extremely focused on this topic. While some collections have one or two poems which are preoccupied with language, in Minter's series it is the dominant topic. This is the case with all of the poetry discussed:

embodiment and writing the body are not minor interests in Alison Croggon's *The Blue Gate* and Rebecca Edwards' *Scar Country* – they are *the* pivotal issues; John Mateer's poems relentlessly engage with the processes involved when different cultures clash and collide; and no other new nineties poetry is as violent as Emma Lew's. Each of these issues relates to the broader issue of subjectivity: language, embodiment, cultural difference, and violence are all engaged in the investigation of what it means to be a subject in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

## Postmodernisms

The issues of language, embodiment, cultural difference and violence, and how these issues relate to subjectivity, are the preoccupations of postmodernity. Although a nebulous term which defies definition, historically understood 'postmodernity' or 'postmodernism' defines the cultural 'dominant' (Jameson) or cultural 'condition' (Lyotard) of a period commencing approximately in the middle of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century (Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*). The roles of language, embodiment, cultural difference and violence in relation to subjectivity, mark a set of social and historical preoccupations of postmodernity. Indeed, these issues, and in particular the issues of subjectivity and language, are *the pre-eminent postmodern issues*. As defined by Bertens, one of the "distinctive qualities" of postmodernity is "an ever-increasing suspicion of and distance from . . . liberal humanism", and its "mainstays" like the "integrity and autonomy of the subject, the transparency of language – and its concomitant capacity to represent reality – and the essentialist character of truth (or at least some truths)" ("The Debate on Postmodernism" 3-5). Postmodern theories of language and subjectivity are intricately complex and at times contentiously debated, but two concepts are irrefutable: language is constructive and subjectivity is a process. Postmodern language constructs or constitutes

subjectivity and reality; it is anti-referential and thus does not reflect reality or provide a transparent view of the world. Postmodern subjectivity rejects a type of subjectivity based on a free, self-contained and self-sufficient, rational and conscious, unique individual developing spontaneously in the living environment/society/family. There is no 'natural' subject who is born into the world with 'innate' knowledge of how to Be, or 'become' as postmodern theorists describe it. What or who subjects 'become' is not determined by Nature or biology – in postmodernism biology is *not* destiny; subjectivity is constructed by language, society, social class, capitalism, and technology. Postmodernism subverts the glorification of rationalism, science, logic and consciousness as the grounding principles of subjectivity. Postmodern thinking about subjectivity rejects ideas that have been with us since the sixteenth century. Thus René Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum,* 'I think, therefore I am', is no longer believable in a world where the claim to universality via objective knowledge has been toppled from its dominant position. The emergence of those previously unheard voices in the towers of Patriarchy – women and people from different cultures – have disrupted the traditional strangle hold of 'Man'.

As well as being informed by postmodern thinking about subjectivity and language, new nineties poetries can be understood as sharing a positive or affirmative type of postmodernism. That is, debates about postmodernism are divided by those who present a negative perspective and those who present a positive perspective. For example, the theories of Fredric Jameson and Jürgen Habermas present a negative approach which views postmodernism as the 'end of history', the absence of values, the dominance of capitalism, commercially complicit art, political action is impossible and subjectivity is a state of total confusion and disorientation. Negative versions of postmodernism lament the 'end' of modernism. Some theorists on the other side of the

debate, the positive side, include Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and Zygmunt Bauman. New nineties poetries reflect an attitude towards postmodernism or an attitude towards living in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that resonates with Donna Haraway's feminist postmodernism:

> it is not necessary to be ultimately depressed by the implications of late twentieth-century women's relations to all aspects of work, culture, production of knowledge, sexuality, and reproduction. For excellent reasons, most Marxisms see domination best and have trouble understanding what can only look like false consciousness and people's complicity in their own domination in late capitalism. It is crucial to remember that what is lost, perhaps especially from women's points of view, is often virulent forms of oppression, nostalgically naturalized in the face of current violation. Ambivalence towards the disrupted unities mediated by high-tech culture requires not sorting consciousness into categories of 'clear-sighted critique grounding a solid political epistemology' versus 'manipulated false consciousness', but subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game. (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 173)

Within the different theories of postmodernism, the positive perspective shares an optimism which arises from an attitude toward the destruction or 'liquidation' of modernity (as Lyotard describes it in *The Postmodern Explained* 18). Whether defined as the end of modernity, the "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the end of the 'grand narratives' of progress and emancipation (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xxiv), the deconstruction of Western metaphysics (Derrida), or the end of phallogocentrism (postmodern feminists), all of these 'ends' create the space for exciting possibilities.

Postmodern ethicist, Zygmunt Bauman, eloquently presents a positive postmodern analysis of the end of modernity:

> Modernity had the uncanny capacity for thwarting self-examination; it wrapped the mechanisms of self-production with a veil of illusions without which those mechanisms, being what they were, could not function properly; modernity had to set itself targets which could not be reached, in order to reach what it could. 'The postmodern perspective' to which this study refers means above all the

tearing off of the mask of illusions; the recognition of certain pretences as false and certain objectives as neither attainable nor, for that matter, desirable. (3)

Unlike the negative perspective which views postmodernism as devoid of value, Bauman suggests that a postmodern ethics does not abandon "modern moral concerns" but it rejects the

> typically modern ways of going about its moral problems (that is, responding to moral challenges with coercive normative regulation in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory). The great issues of ethics – like human rights, social justice, balance between peaceful co-operation and personal self-assertion, synchronization of individual conduct and collective welfare – have lost nothing of their topicality. They only need to be seen, and dealt with in a novel way. (4)

The 'novel ways' of Bauman's postmodern ethics are based on the acknowledgement and acceptance of the conditions of postmodernity which include ambiguity, ambivalence, diversity, difference, contradiction, and aporetic situation. These principles arise from the disavowal of modernist values like universalism and foundationalism. Lyotard presents a much bleaker explanation for the end of modernism and the Enlightenment:

> the very basis of each of the great narratives of emancipation has, so to speak, been invalidated over the last fifty years. All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real: 'Auschwitz' refutes speculative doctrine. At least that crime, which was real, was not rational. All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian: 'Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980' (to mention only the most obvious examples) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. All that is democratic exists through and for the people, and vice versa: 'May 1968' refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. If left to themselves, the laws of supply and demand will result in universal prosperity, and vice versa: 'the crises of 1911 and [the worldwide depression of] 1929' refute the doctrine of economic liberalism. (*The Lyotard Reader* 318)

Although this portrayal seems negative, Lyotard is one of the more positive theorists of postmodernism. Lyotard's affirmative perspective is due to his view that the grand narratives were always problematic because their universal claims of 'truth' and 'justice' were based on a "transcendental illusion" and the "price of this illusion is terror" (*The Postmodern Explained* 16). History has demonstrated that the path of 'universal truth and

justice' has resulted in murder, torture and starvation. With the collapse of the singular and unified rules, "metanarratives" and "language games" of the grand narratives, comes the "formation and free exploitation of Ideas *in the plural,* [and hence] the idea that this end is the beginning of the *infinity of heterogeneous finalities*" (*The Lyotard Reader* 409). In place of the dominance of a single idea, or a universal way of thinking about history, society and culture, Lyotard suggests that the concepts of plurality and heterogeneity are the keys for historians and critics of all discourses.

The poetry of Minter, Croggon, Edwards, Mateer and Lew, has much more in common with these positive postmodernisms than the negative postmodernisms. Rather than a nihilistic perception of living in the late twentieth century their poems engage language in the investigation of what it means to live in postmodernity and seek 'novel ways' of creating possibilities where impossibilities previously reigned. For example, postmodern feminists positively view the break down of dichotomies like the mind and body and embrace the connections that are made possible because of this rupture. Demonstrative of this feminist-postmodern perspective is Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's *écriture féminine:* a revolutionary way of writing that opens writing to the body and the body to writing. The embodied poetries of Croggon and Edwards can be understood as embracing postmodernism and the 'novel ways' of *écriture féminine* – ways which subvert phallogocentrism. Embodied writing enables Croggon to connect with what has been denied in poetry – the oozing, pulsing body (Kristeva's abject body as theorised in the *Powers of Horror*), childbirth, breastfeeding, the archaic life of children – and from this connection the anaesthetised reality of the past loses its power and new possibilities are created. In Edwards' embodied poetry the animal of childbirth and writing poetry escapes from the cage of restrictions that have prevented its existence in poetry. Whether monster or mother is created is less important than the possibilities enabled by

the escape of the 'becoming-body-animal' of postmodern writing. Utopia is not promised but the postmodern embrace of the body offers exciting possibilities for Croggon and Edwards.

Postmodern writing practices, like writing the body and embodied poetries, work with a constructive concept of language and emphasise subjectivity as a multiple process of becoming. Positive postmodernists encourage writing because language constitutes subjectivity. Cixous calls to women, "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you for you; your body is yours, take it" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 335), because it is through "writing her self, [that] women will return to the body" (337) and return the stolen body of subjectivity:

> To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. (338)

Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari hail the power of writing:

> Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorializations, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 11)

In their theories writing is important "because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not the becoming-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf etc" (240). Writing unleashes becomings.

*Subjectivity*

On the negative side of postmodernism is Fredric Jameson's perspective of a totally confused and disorientated subject who is incapable of 'becoming' anything but complicit with capitalism. Jameson suggests that the sudden change in society has created an imbalance in which technology has changed, but the subject has not.

> My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new [postmodern] space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject; we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. ("Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" 80)

The "postmodern hyperspace" (83) is "bewildering": Jameson claims to be "at a loss when it comes to conveying the thing itself" and he claims to struggle to find an appropriate "language" with which to discuss the postmodern space. All of this rhetoric enables Jameson to admonish postmodern space, lament the loss of modernism, and suggest that postmodern subjectivity is dominated by capitalism and technology to such an extent that we are "increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience" (77). Jameson's solution to our postmodern condition is presented in his theory of the "aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*" which involves the "imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium" but even his solution is portrayed as "unimaginable, [and] perhaps ultimately impossible" (80). Jameson holds little hope that postmodern subjects will achieve these new dimensions and hence will remain trapped and dominated by capitalism. Jameson's postmodern subject cannot but be complicit with capitalism and thus political action is impossible. From Jameson's modernist view, postmodernism is something to escape, but postmodern subjects are incapable of such an escape (Wise, Patton).

In contrast to Jameson's negativity are those theorists who affirm postmodern subjectivity. Theorists like Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Cixous, Irigaray, Haraway and others embrace the heterogeneous potential of the subject in process. In place of the modernist concept of Being, (positive) postmodernisms embrace becomings. As theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, becomings are transformative processes of subjectivity:

> Fibers lead us from one to the other, transform one into the other as they pass through doors and across thresholds. Singing, or composing, painting, writing have no other aim: to unleash these becomings. . . . all becomings are already molecular. That is because becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone. Nor is it to form formal relations. Neither of these two figures of analogy is applicable to becoming: neither the imitation of a subject nor the proportionality of a form. Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the function one fulfils, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 272)

The subject in process creates multiple 'lines of flight' which are not governed by hierarchical systems (arborescent systems) or pre-established paths, but involved in mapping haphazard 'rhizomatic' alternatives, deterritorialisations and destratifications. The postmodern "self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities" (249). The subject in process is not motivated by structures and there "is no structure" to becomings, "only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules and particles of all kinds" (266). Becomings are all about transformative connections – between peoples, oceans, lands, animals, everything and anything has the potential to spark becomings. This postmodern concept of subjectivity is fluid and unstable; it is not a matter of searching for stability but an acknowledgement and acceptance of the ceaselessly changing ways of postmodernity. In contrast to Jameson's negativity, these theorists suggest that postmodernism creates new opportunities and possibilities for the subjects' experience.

The poetry of new nineties poets Minter, Croggon, Edwards, Mateer and Lew, engages with fluid and multiple concepts of subjectivity which are actively involved in 'fashioning' or creating poetic 'representations of their current experiences'. The fluid sense of subjectivity in Minter's poetry is presented by the unstable and inconsistent use of

pronouns: the 'I' of one line might not be the same 'I' of the next line and this can be said of most of the pronouns in the "Empty Texas" series. Minter dismantles the ego-centered sense of subjectivity and the omnipresent 'I' and engages with an investigation of mobile subjectivity. Certainly this makes for difficult poetry but Minter's innovations are interested in pushing concepts like postmodern subjectivity to the limits and linguistic innovations rarely produce 'easy reading'. Postmodern subjectivity in Alison Croggon's poetry is focused on an embodied sense of subjectivity. Croggon's postmodern approach to subjectivity subverts the modern privilege of all that is rational and logic (brain) and embraces the body and all its 'unacceptable' aspects. Open to the subjective processes of becoming a mother, the anarchy of children offers the possibility of a world free of preconceived ways of thinking and feeling. It involves processes that open subjectivity to an "unanaesthetised reality" (*Navigatio* manuscript 77) which challenges the "world's closed possibilities" and raises questions like those asked by the mother who has given birth: "are faeces so filthy? is urine so disgusting? is the milk-engorged breast so distasteful? what is a nakedness that is neither shameful nor shameless?" (*Navigatio* 94). Croggon's postmodern concept of subjectivity questions the denial of embodied experiences and embraces a fluid sense of subjectivity that is open to the body. In contrast to a modern drive for a reified, stable, hierarchical sense of subjectivity, Croggon's subjects dissolve:

> The lovers pressed their cheeks
> one against the other
>
> skin bruising and dissolving
> in a monstrous kiss
>
> and each passed through each
> into pure odour
>
> birds, lungs, bricks, trees
> sliding into black water
> ("Divinations" II 44)

Sensually and sexually evoked, subjects meld into each other to become nothing but "odour". The desired state of subjectivity is to be free of identity, to 'become-imperceptible', to "hold / the dream of play and vanish" ("Child's play", *Attempts at Being* 3). Unlike the stable and authoritative Father of modernity, Croggon's postmodern mother becomes involved in destabilising and transformative processes which question identity: in "Bearing" the mother asks "who has given birth? and who is born?" (*The Blue Gate* 28). Similarly, Rebecca Edwards' sense of subjectivity is fluid and unstable and investigates the processes of becoming-animal of childbirth. The violent experience of the body being cut open and stitched back together evokes a becoming-horse, becoming-monster of the subject giving birth. Deterritorialising the Greek myth of the Minotaur for her own feminist purposes, Edwards' subject transforms into a "two-headed" monster, "some kind of thing with horns" ("Birth of the Minotaur in a Public Ward" 17-23 *Scar Country*). A stable sense of subjectivity is not achieved but nor is it reached for. In a typical postmodern fashion, Edwards' poetry stays with the processes of becomings rather than moving onto what the subject becomes. Edwards' subjects may be "exiled from desire" but they continue to desire ("The Sea of Tranquillity Is Desire" 66 *Scar Country*) because desire is the process of becomings. Edwards' subjects are courageous and strong women who refuse to stay still, 'be put in their place' – they are screaming, raging women who refuse to be silenced. John Mateer's postmodernism is demonstrated by his multiple or hybrid sense of subjectivity which is formed by the clash of different cultures, and Emma Lew's poems are less interested in a unified sense of subjectivity than an emotionally orientated subject.

Donna Haraway's theories of postmodern subjectivity create what she defines as the 'cyborg': part human, part technology. Unlike Jameson's or Jean Baudrillard's negative perspectives of postmodernism which present a powerless sense of subjectivity because

the extreme dominance of technology has rendered the subject incapable of differentiating between reality and technologically simulated versions of reality (see Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*), Haraway embraces the interconnections between technology and subjectivity.

> Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualism without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they. (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 180)

Haraway's cyborg politics offers a 'novel way' of living in postmodernity. It is not that postmodern subjects are not manipulated by technology; Haraway acknowledges that technology dominates postmodernity and our sense of subjectivity. However, to reject technology and nostalgically seek a return to 'Nature' where a so-called 'authentic self' supposedly exists, Haraway suggests, supports the dominating Western world. Haraway views postmodern subjectivity as irretrievably interconnected to technology: "the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organisms; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (150). Haraway certainly does not view this situation as utopian; on the contrary she writes of it negatively:

> 'Integrity' and 'sincerity' of the Western self gives way to decision procedures and expert systems . . . No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language'. (163)

Haraway defines postmodernism as the "informatics of domination" (163) which controls via its "common language" of coding: "communications sciences and modern biologies are constructed by a common move – *the translation of the world into a problem of coding,* a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control

disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange" (164).

> Immunobiology and associated medical practices are rich exemplars of the privilege of coding and recognition systems as objects of knowledge, as constructions of bodily reality for us. (164)

The situation of postmodern subjectivity requires an appropriate politics.

Writing plays an important role in Haraway's cyborg politics, but unlike Habermas who in "Modernity – An Incomplete Project" advocates the need for perfect communication, Haraway advocates the "interruption of communication" because this is the "biggest threat" to the controlling powers of postmodernism (164).

> Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. (176)

According to Haraway's theories of postmodernism, poets like Minter, Croggon, Edwards, Mateer and Lew are actively involved in cyborg politics: they investigate the "limits of language" (179) and they are not interested in perfect communication. While this frequently produces difficult poetry, and frustrates some reviewers, it is a form of postmodern politics that attempts to resist the coding or translation of postmodern subjectivity.

In particular, Peter Minter comments on poetry's investigation of the 'limits of language' in relation to the digitilisation and "molecularisation of the subject and language" and the "specific arrangements" of these "bits" which are manipulated by the "huge tectonic cultural process[es]" of postmodernism (Interview by Debbie Comerford). He suggests that poetry can attend to the "logic of how these bits are arranged" – Haraway's codes of the informatics of domination – by engaging with "microscopic detail from the level of

an entire book right down to the level of how a letter, or spaces between letters, might function" (Minter).   Like Haraway's 'cyborg politics', Minter investigates the limits of language by attending to "the syntax, the grammar, punctuation and a particular form of lineation" so as to "produce some kind of mutation of grammar or syntax" (Minter 44). As discussed in chapter two in relation to his series, *Morning, Hyphen,* this investigation has taken Minter into a field of enquiry that focuses on the 'placement' and movement of subjectivity.

John Mateer also explicitly deals with issues of communication as they pertain to postmodern subjectivity and the processes of subjectivity involved when different cultures meet.  In Mateer's poetry subjectivity is concerned with the postmodern concept of hybridity: the subject-in-process continues to be an important concept but the emphasis is on the multiplicity of subjectivity.  Whereas Haraway's cyborg is a hybrid self born from the interconnection of technology and the human body, Mateer's subject-in-process is composed of different cultures.   In "When I'm Called 'A Human' …" the subject sees his hybrid self in the mirror:

> What is there in the mirror? Who? An old Khmer woman hollowed by
> torture? And that on the radio? One bulldozer uncovering a
> Koori burial ground in the path of a highway? That's
>
>   not a face. Is that anything like *me*? (Anachronism 83-84)

Hybridity is a concept shared by the theories of both postmodernism and postcolonialism, thus the theories of Ien Ang are especially applicable to Mateer's poetry because, as she comments, she is a post-colonial theorist working in a postmodern context (*On Not Speaking Chinese* 17).  Like Haraway (who also discusses post-colonial issues), Ang emphasises that perfect communication is not what is needed today.  In fact, Ang's politics of hybridity highlights that when different cultures meet, perfect communication is rarely possible and to pretend otherwise is problematic.   Ang

comments that the meetings of different cultures are "riven with potential miscommunication" and to expect these interconnections to be a matter of "simple shaking hands, of happy, harmonious merger and fusion" is not the appropriate political approach. Ang's politics of hybridity advocates that it is important to attend to those moments when "communication seems unavoidably to *fail*" (180).

As I discuss in chapter three, Mateer's poetry is composed of these moments when communication between different cultures fails. The stuttering, phrase-book aided subject of "Marlboro Man" painfully attempts to communicate with the Indonesians around him and when communication fails his sense of self seems to disappear (55). As an exiled South African living in Australia, the hybrid sense of subjectivity investigated in Mateer's poetry is informed by his personal experiences, and it is for this reason that the miscommunication that is produced by his attempts (in poetry) to connect with Indigenous Australian cultures is rendered even more painful. And yet despite these failures of miscommunication, Mateer's poetry does not present a negative or nihilistic perspective on postmodernism. Mateer is not nostalgic for a stable, singular sense of subjectivity. Certainly the situation of hybridity is at times painful but within the poems there is also a powerful attitude of optimism. For example, in "The Brewery Site" the subject's attempts to connect with the Indigenous culture of the area have mostly failed but another connection has been made and that brings a sense of peace to the subject. The poem concludes with the subject reconciling himself and the sacred site by becoming "like a stone sitting here above the slippery waterline / Feeling the roots dig like ropes into a mother's flesh / Feeling the dolphins and small sharks pass either way" (*Anachronism* 85-89). This is not the epic optimism of 'grand narratives' (a return to modernist ways), for it has more in common with Lyotard's 'differend' (*The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend*). Lyotard defines a differend as something that which

"remains to be phrased", it is the unpresentable that is "not presentable under the rules of knowledge" which govern the Enlightenment and Modernity (57):

> As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both of the arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule). (*The Differend* xi)

Caught between a rock and a hard place (literally), the subject of "The Brewery Site" cannot bridge the gap between the different cultures – injustices exist and conflict has not been resolved – the subject recognises that he cannot 'solve' the problems of cultural relations but his acknowledgment that these differences exist creates the space to "put into phrases [that which] cannot yet be" (Lyotard, *The Differend* 13). This idea of language striving (reaching Haraway's "limits of language") to present something that exists but which is (almost) unpresentable is a reoccurring concept in postmodern theories as it is in the new nineties poetry of Minter, Croggon, Edwards, Mateer and Lew.

The poetry of Emma Lew has been defined and dismissed as postmodern partly because she supposedly creates her poems using the postmodern method of 'pastiche' and partly because her poetry is supposedly an example of postmodern nihilism. I discuss both of these accusations in detail in chapter five; here I want to focus on Lew's supposedly negative view of postmodernism. Certainly Lew is one of the more negative of the new nineties poets. Like Mateer's attempt to investigate the limits of language so as to present the unpresentable, Lew's poetry engages language to evoke those emotions and feelings which are (almost) unpresentable in postmodernity. The poems relevant to this discussion are not those which I discuss in relation to Lew's mannerist mode - those typically postmodern in their ironic posturing, including "Bounty" (28), "Famous Vexations" (32), "Fast" (37), "Honour-Bound" (44-45), "Loquax Ludi" (46) (all from

*Anything the Landlord Touches*). The poems which are evocative of intense feelings or emotions include poems like "The Rider" (19), "The Peaks" (14), "Marshes" (13), "The Tale of Dark Louise" (17), "Snow and Gold" (30) (all from *Anything the Landlord Touches*). In these poems, Lew's subjects are caught in situations of despair, they are threatened by murder, war, hunger, the cold, and various other horrific and frightening situations. It is these situations and environments that give Lew's poems their dark and foreboding atmospheres, but what seems to go unnoticed by those reviewers who accuse her of postmodern nihilism is that, despite these gruelling situations, the subjects of the poems are characterised by an attitude of optimism. For example, the female subject in "Snow and Gold" (30) is a member of a "troupe" "on the heels of the army", she gives birth "in the street", she is plagued by "sores" and yet she courageously continues, she plays music and she sings. She recognises her strength, "I had talent for the noble virtues of blind faith even then", and celebrates what she can:

> What was I besides the strength of my shadow?
> I climbed up on the trains and tossed down coal.
> The wind blew and merged with me, my childhood and my life,
>    my passions and transgressions.
> Even if they weren't gold, the trinkets glittered.

The poem concludes with self-assurance – in spite of the hardships she has had to suffer. This is typical of Lew's poetry: the subjects of "The Peaks" "crossed the river and fought and dropped and lifted again", the "riding such slow work", but still they were "Becoming tough, growing beautifully" (14-15); in "The Tale of Dark Louise" "I strive and I struggle, I can't keep the wolf", the subject is exiled from the convent but she remains defiant, "I put on the dress that brought me this shame. / Fire is never out of my chamber" (17). There are poems that are consistently bleak, like "The True Dark Town" with its subject trapped by snow, encroaching death and hungry fleas, but even the subject in this poem has "rescued" something – "pitiful" though it is (51).

One of the problems with the accusation of nihilism in conjunction with postmodernism is the absence of clarity connecting these terms. As Ashley Woodward states in her introduction to "Nihilism and the Postmodern in Vattimo's Nietzsche", "a connection is often made between postmodernism and nihilism, but the full meaning of such a connection is rarely explored" (1). Woodward's article is relevant here because she distinguishes between modern nihilism and postmodern nihilism. Modern nihilism, according to Nietzshe, is a "disease of the modern age" which is grounded in the Christian belief of a "*better* world" beyond this one (Woodward 2-3). Woodward's "modernist interpretation of Nietzsche" emphasises that this type of nihilism is characterised by the desire or "possibility of *overcoming* nihilism, the conviction that there shall come a time in history when nihilism shall be left behind" (3) (Woodward points out that this is a common interpretation of Nietzsche 8). This desire to overcome nihilism is "essentially bound up with the modern narrative of progress; by overcoming the old history moves towards a future state of enlightenment" (5). In contrast, postmodern nihilism is the "overcoming of the *desire* to overcome nihilism itself" (Woodward's discussion of Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche 6). In the absence of a belief in a better world and progress towards enlightenment, postmodern nihilism becomes "*affirmative*" (7). For Nietzsche, this affirmation or "the "overcoming" of nihilism consists in *taking a different attitude* towards the nihilistic interpretation of the world itself" (7). This affirmative attitude is the basis of all the positive postmodernisms I have discussed. Likewise, new nineties poets present a complex form of affirmation: their poetry presents a positive perspective of postmodernism while simultaneously acknowledging the despair of the world. Given that new nineties poets are engaged in investigations of subjectivity in the medium of language and offer a positive or affirmative perspective of postmodernity, their poetry has much to offer those interested in late twentieth and early twenty-first century society and culture.

## *Postmodern Terminology in Relation to Australian Poetry*

While American poet Charles Olson used the term as early as 1951 (in a letter to Robert

Creely, Hoover xxv) and American poetry criticism uses the term extensively, in Australia

poetry and postmodernism are rarely used in the same sentence. (In contrast, the term is

commonplace in discussions of novels in Australia.) As discussed in detail in relation to

the poetry of John Mateer (chapter three) and Emma Lew (chapter four), too frequently

the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' are used as a shorthand to define all that is

wrong with new poetry. However, as Anne Vickery points out in "Beyond Strictly Verse

and Pulp Diction: Approaching a Postmodern Poetics in Australian Writing via Some

Language Poetry Shortcuts" (*Salt* 1996), there has been "little debate over what a

postmodern poetry might look like in Australia" (126). Vickery's discussion makes a

substantial and intelligent contribution to such a debate and provides a useful general

definition of postmodern poetry:

> Postmodernism then, may be seen as a cultural dominant in this age, embracing
> the contestatory and contradictory modes of cultural production that frame and
> maintain the social present. As a discourse, it signals the end of grand
> legitimating narratives . . . the bourgeois ego (in the form of a unified
> autonomous self) and the picture theory of representation (language as a window
> to the world).
>
> In terms of discourse, the 'postmodern' has come to mean an experimental
> approach to composition. (129)

The latter part of the 1990s sees this reluctance diminishing. In 1998, Lyn McCredden's

review of Ken Bolton's *Untimely Meditations* in *HEAT* discusses the poetry in relation to

recent Australian film and uses the term postmodern to explain the way the central

character "embodies" "the vertigo of such rapid conjunctions" brought about by "one

who doesn't/can't/doesn't want to rise above the limitations of what he or she

apprehends" (194). However, McCredden humourously frames her use of the term with

"dare I say it", evidence that it is still not a fully accepted term in discussions of Australian poetry. In contrast, in her review of Pam Brown's *50-50,* in the same issue of *HEAT,* Hawai`i poet-critic Susan Schultz uses the term postmodernism without hesitation. Philip Mead, in his chapter "The American Model II" in the international collection of poetry criticism *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (2003), uses postmodern synonymously with innovative and avant-garde, and specifically in relation to the poetry of the Generation of '68, John Tranter and John Kinsella. Peter Minter and Kate Fagan's collaborative *Jacket* review of John Tranter's poetry, "Murdering Alphabets, Disorienting Romance: John Tranter and Postmodern Australian Poetics", demonstrates that by 2005 the reluctance to use the term 'postmodern' in relation to Australian poetry has disappeared (available at http://jacketmagazine.com/27/faga-mint.html). In part, the reluctance to incorporate postmodernism in Australian poetry criticism can be understood as a symptomatic response to those "opponents of 'Theory'" who occupy influential positions in the public sphere (Dixon, "Introduction" to *Canonozities* 13). However, poets are less restricted by this constraint. For Tranter, as Minter and Fagan reveal, postmodernism was problematic because he was attempting to "produce a postmodern poetics from amidst a literary culture in which modernism had never really cohered" (10). Thus, Australian poets have been writing in the *shadow* of this situation and as a response they have been reluctant to define a postmodern poetics or use the term to define their poetry or that of their contemporaries.

### Postmodern Tendencies

Kevin Hart suggests that the term "postmodernism" is limited but it can assist those discussing poetry to "identify certain traits" ("From Modern to Postmodern and Beyond" *Overland* 1992, 37). Postmodern traits or "tendencies" as Ihab Hassan terms

them (152) are clearly diagrammed in his now famous lists which distinguish modernism and postmodernism. Whereas modernism is characterised by purpose, design, hierarchy, mastery/logos, presence, centering, root/depth, interpretation/reading, origin/cause, metaphysics, determinacy, and transcendence, postmodern tendencies include antiform (disjunctive, open), play, chance, silence, process, performance, participation, dispersal, syntagm, parataxis, metonymy, combination, rhizome/surface, anti-narrative or *"Petite Histoire"*, desire, difference-differance, indeterminacy and immanence (Hassan 152). Many of these tendencies are the basis of postmodern aesthetic practices. Thus postmodern art is typically described as "involving playful irony, parody, parataxis, self-consciousness, fragmentation" (Waugh, "Introduction" *Postmodernism* 3). Postmodern tendencies in poetry are articulated through various aesthetic practices involving pastiche, bricolage, mutation, synthesis, collage, appropriation, hybridisation, non-sequesters, discontinuity, "decentred text, free play of surfaces, self-reflection" (Hart 37), fluid or unstable uses of pronouns, non-linear or rhizomatic narratives, an emphasis on the materiality of language, an emphasis on the artificiality of poetry or a return of the artifice (Perloff, *Radical Artifice*), serial and procedural forms (Conte, *Unending Design*), disbelief and subversion of mimetic realism.

As well as connecting a group of poets as eclectic as the new nineties poets, postmodern tendencies and aesthetic practices differentiate the nineties poets from those who have emerged before them. As Bertens suggests, the postmodernism of the 1990s is not the same as the postmodernism of the 1960s (*The Idea of the Postmodern* and "The Debate on Postmodernism"). For example, the postmodern practice of blurring boundaries between genres is an important tendency of postmodern literature (Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory*). In relation to Australian postmodern poetry Vickery comments that

Part of the project of postmodern poetry has been to challenge traditional distinctions between verse and prose, literature and philosophy, aesthetics and politics. In this sense, it may be seen as a cross-discipline. As a result, poetry becomes less easy to recognise as such.

As an example of this in Australian poetry, Vickery presents a concrete poem by Robert Harris, "One Short Jacket Thrown Over a Chair":



In contrast, new nineties poetries written for the page cannot be mistaken for anything other than poetry. Certainly non-traditional spacing, indentations, capitals, italics and other typographical arrangements are playfully used, but a poem continues to look like a poem. The prose style poetry of new nineties poet Coral Hull could be considered to break with the traditional form of poetry but it is a long way from the radical presentation of a concrete poem. Predominantly, new nineties poets are not interested in

radically altering the visual presentation of a poem on the page. Due to the possibilities created by new information technologies and the internet, this type of radical aesthetic practice is now the domain of hypertext, hypermedia, multi-media or cyberpoetry. As Komninos Zervos, one of Australia's leading poets in this field suggests, these "new kinds of techno-literature" represent "a use of words that previous to high powered computers and multimedia capabilities of the internet, could not be conceived or achieved" ("Techno-literatures on the Internet"). Other Australian cyber poets include Hazel Smith, Geniwate, Mez, Jason Nelson (an American now resident in Australia), Jayne Fenton Keane, John Bennett and Dianne Caney.

Those poets known as the 'Generation of '68', that now famous group of poets who emerged in the late sixties in Australia, were originally defined by Tranter as modernists (in 1979 in the introduction to *New Australian Poetry,* the anthology largely responsible for the establishment of the 'Generation of '68' as a 'school' or 'movement'). (Although the label, the 'Generation of '68', is limited and problematic I use it in the way Tranter's introduction intended.) Since then these poets have been referred to as postmodern (Hollier, "Generational Anxiety after Gangland"; Mead, "The American Model II"; Vickery, "Beyond Strictly Verse and Pulp Diction"; Tranter interviewed by Kinsella). Emerging as they did in the early years of postmodernism, the poetry of the Generation of '68 is both modern and postmodern simultaneously. For example, one modernist trait is their explicit and oppositional politics and the role of poetry in this politics. This was the case for the Generation of '68 who positioned themselves in opposition to all that stood for authority and this included their predecessors in poetry (Tranter *The New Australian Poetry* xvii). Mead describes this as the "typical rhetoric of any (modernist) revolution in art" (173). In contrast, new nineties poets acknowledge and respect the differences between contemporary poetry and poetry of the past. They acknowledge and

even celebrate these different poetic styles. Some new nineties poetry is politically explicit but much is not. In *Postmodern Ethics* Zygmunt Bauman effectively summarises the differences between modern and postmodern politics:

> the moral thought and practice of modernity was animated by the belief in the possibility of a *non-ambivalent, non-aporetic ethical code*. Perhaps such a code has not been found yet. But it surely waits round the next corner. Or the corner after next.
>
> It is the *disbelief* in such a possibility that is *post*modern (9-10).

New nineties poets may agree with Auden that poetry makes nothing happen and that it has little if any ramifications in the political world, but as demonstrated by their engagement with the issues of language, embodiment, cultural difference and violence and the role of these issues within the broader concern of subjectivity, they are ethically attuned to how we live and attempt to live in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

These different political attitudes are also evident formally. In "Cross That Border – Close That Gap" Leslie Fiedler posits that postmodern literature challenges the division between high culture and mass culture. In particular the integrity of high art is questioned and popular culture is embraced. This is evident in the Generation of '68's rejection of the so-called 'high' poetic language of their predecessors and the academy, and the embracement of a 'language of the street'. Their poetry was revolutionary for incorporating lines like these by Rae Desmond Jones:

> meantime the masses who are
> as usual deaf blind & stupid
> just keep walking to the bus or
> into the office reading newspapers
> & quite obviously don't give a fuck
> ("The Poets" *The New Australian Poetry* 23).

In contrast, new nineties poets use every type of language available to them: highly wrought poetic language, popular, slang, and vulgar, foreign and made-up words. By the

1990s the Generation of '68's conflation of 'high' poetic language with a conservative politics and radical or popular language with an oppositional politics is no longer tenable. (In *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry* Blasing discusses this thesis in relation to American poets Frank O'Hara, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery and James Merrill, 1995). The postmodern ethics of new nineties poetries is not based upon essentialist arguments; it is based upon an acknowledgement of difference and hybridity which accepts ambivalence and ambiguity.

## Critical Methodologies: Working Within 'A Spirit of Eclecticism'

### Eclectic Criticism

This thesis consciously and ethically works with and builds upon the 'spirit of eclecticism' of new nineties poets. It does so by firstly emphasising the heterogeneity of the poetic practices and the predominantly accepting attitude towards different poetic practices, and secondly by engaging with new nineties poetries with equally eclectic critical approaches. This thesis opposes homogenising criticism such as the use of limited labels and the establishment of 'warring' schools and avoids an omnipotent critical practice which violently controls and reduces eclecticism. One of the reasons for this heterogeneous approach is because the different issues of language, embodiment, cultural difference, and violence require a variety of approaches. For example, to understand the experimental approach to language and the playful engagement with American Language poetry performed by Minter in his "Empty Texas" series, it is necessary to comprehend the influence and complexities of American Language poetry. Thus, an influence-orientated methodology is utilised. Discussing the influences of Croggon and Edward's embodied poetry would not have provided an understanding of why their poetry is embodied nor offer exciting ways of reading their poetry. Thus, an embodied form of criticism is utilised. An embodied methodology could be applied to

Mateer's poetry but it would not adequately attend to the post-colonial politics that his poetry works with and therefore it would not consider the most important element of his poetry. Neither an influence orientated, embodied or post-colonial approach to Emma Lew's poetry would have provided insight into why her poetry is so violent nor would these approaches have been able to deal with that which drives Lew's writing – the powerful and often mysterious world of feelings. These critical approaches are not definitive, but they effectively assist the reading of poetries that are intricately complex and frequently difficult. The argument that the eclecticism of new nineties poetries calls for equally eclectic criticism, is an ethical approach which respects the 'spirit of eclecticism' of the poetry milieu by working with it, within it and thus building upon it. Emphasising eclecticism – as the defining feature of new nineties poetries and as an appropriate approach to criticism – is ethically grounded in 'a spirit of eclecticism'.

Furthermore, like the postmodern tendencies and axioms of new nineties poetries, this eclectic approach to criticism can be defined as postmodern. In contrast to a unified and singular approach, eclectic criticism accepts "difference and the celebration of heterogeneity" (Bertens and Natoli xiv). Although one of postmodernism's leading theorists, Jean-François Lyotard, states that "[e]clecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture", he is referring to the acceptance and celebration of "Anything Goes" which is the "realism of money" or the dominant paradigm of capitalism (*The Postmodern Explained* 8). In contrast to the 'anything goes' approach my use of the term eclecticism strives to avoid a 'grand narrative' (Lyotard) approach to new nineties poetries.

*Thematic*

This thesis employs a thematic approach which defines and thoroughly engages with the vital issues of new nineties poetries without homogenising or negating eclecticism. My research and reading of hundreds of poetry collections reveals that the issues of language, embodiment, cultural difference, and violence, are the predominant issues of new nineties poetries. A conventional approach might take one of these issues and discuss that issue in relation to various poets. Indeed, an entire thesis could be written on any one of the issues. However, as this study is the first thorough and extensive critical work on new nineties poetries, I have chosen to dedicate one chapter to each issue so as to give each issue due focus. Another thematic approach might include a number of issues and discuss a number of poets per issue. Rather than enable a thorough critical engagement, that approach is survey-orientated and risks presenting a superficial reading of the poetry. Again that is not the type of approach best suited to the current needs of Australian poetry criticism. Recent articles in *Blue Dog, Australian Book Review* and the *Australian* newspaper, have focused on the current critical culture of Australian poetry and one of the present needs is "in-depth criticism". As John Mateer states in *Australian Book Review*:

> we need more, and more attentive, in-depth criticism. We need critics who don't simply wish to provide an overview of the literature in which they are interested. We need critics who are actively engaged in investigating and elucidating the poetics of the writing and who wish to talk about the relationship between language and their life. ("The Postponement of Judgement" 49)

By focusing on one poet per issue, or two as is the case in the embodiment chapter, my thesis presents "in-depth criticism" which is able to thoroughly engage with some of the most difficult of all the new nineties poetries.

***Conversations***

Vitally important to the research methods of my thesis are the numerous discussions and conversations I have had with many new nineties poets via emails, letters, phone calls, and personal contact at festivals, conferences, and pre-arranged interviews. Email has enabled profuse dialogue and, as demonstrated throughout my thesis, I have relied on it extensively. The inclusion of my discussions with new nineties poets suggests that my criticism is more traditional than postmodern. Since the 'death of the author' (Barths) and the supremacy of the text is exemplary of postmodern critical practices, the inclusion of a poet's thinking about poetry is certainly not typical of a postmodern framework. However, poets' comments, opinions, thoughts and ideas about poetry, continue to be considered valuable to the discussion of poetry. For example, those American poets known synonymously as American Language poets and American Postmodern poets have written extensively on their poetry and poetics, and numerous interviews have been published. Similarly, the postmodern 'death of the author' has paradoxically coincided with the rise of the author as 'celebrity', as seen at the many writers' festivals and the like. (In Australia it is mostly novelists who have been bestowed with celebrity status today, but some poets, like Dorothy Porter, have also enjoyed the limelight.) My inclusion of discussions with new nineties poets can also be aligned with other critical approaches that focus on poets' comments and interviews with poets. Examples of critics continuing this traditional approach in contemporary criticism include Martin Duwell's *A Possible Contemporary Poetry: Interviews with Thirteen Poets from the New Australian Poetry* (1982), David Brooks and Brenda Walker's edited collection, *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics* (1989), and Barbara Willliam's recent publication, *In Other Words* (1998). Whether defined as modern, postmodern or otherwise, poets' comments continue to occupy an important position in poetry criticism.

The inclusion of conversations and discussions also addresses what Thomas Shapcott suggests is needed in the current critical culture of Australian poetry. He comments that in conjunction with "scholarly" criticism, the current critical culture needs criticism that contains "anecdotal evidence, memoirs, reflections from living writers and their contemporaries" so that a "perspective to the creative environment of the era" is presented ("Bilingual Poetry" 51). Similarly, Martin Harrison calls for a rebirth of the "modernist symbiosis between critic and poet":

> The writing of new poetry, the teaching of poetry at university and in schools and a widely practised literary critical activity came into existence side by side: it's hard to imagine the reputation of a Yeats or an Eliot or a Stevens or a Pound outside of this modernist symbiosis between critic and poet. ("Criticism and the Written Poem" 45)

Due to the internet and email it has been possible to work with a certain type of 'symbiosis between critic and poet', but my research has found that personal contact *in combination* with email provides a more productive and ultimately more rewarding approach.

### *Reviews*

The past decade has seen much debate and discussion about the state of contemporary poetry criticism. Although technically separate genres, I shall use the terms 'criticism' and 'reviews' synonymously, as is the case in contemporary literary discussions. This thesis examines the reviews of new nineties poetries to establish how the poetry is being received and what types of critical apparatuses are being used by the reviewers. Poetry reviews are important for new poetry because they play an imperative role in shaping future critical discussions. In the case of new or emergent poets, like the new nineties poets, the role of reviews should not be underestimated. As Kevin Brophy reminds us in *Australian Literary Studies*, "[w]ith a first book of an unknown writer, reviews constitute one of the earliest public processes in constructing an author and a book as reputations"

(271). Michael Sharkey points out that reviews are important because they confer a "sense of authentication": "[t]here is a sense in which poetry does not exist until it is reviewed" ("Reviewing Now" 69). In the case of critical writing on new poetry and first collections, there is only the primary source of poetry to consult. In the absence of critical literature, reviews become the sole literary resource and therefore they are an important consideration within this thesis.

## Homage

The title of my thesis, "a spirit of eclecticism", might be defined as postmodern 'pastiche' because it involves 'borrowing' from John Leonard's comments about new nineties poetries, but it is more accurately a traditional form of homage. My intention is to acknowledge a poetry editor whose role in contemporary poetry is immense and, on a more personal level, to acknowledge and pay due respect to the person who introduced me to poetry and in particular new nineties poetry. During my undergraduate studies in 1994, at James Cook University in Cairns, I attended a poetry reading organised by John Leonard. The poet was Jacinta Le Plastrier Aboukhater and her sensually powerful poems struck me – these were different poems, poems unlike those that formed my Bachelor of Arts degree, unlike those I was familiar with. Unfortunately Jacinta Le Plastrier Aboukhater has never published her manuscript and so I have not focused on her poetry in my study but I am beholden to her and John Leonard for sparking the initial interest that grew into this thesis. As well as expressing personal appreciation, Leonard is one of the foremost experts on Australian poetry with a special interest in new nineties poetry. He has been involved in editorial work with many new nineties poets, and Alison Croggon's dedication of her first collection to John Leonard, the "perfect reader", demonstrates something of the respect and gratitude that is bestowed on him by many new nineties poets.

As well as the inclusion of discussions with poets, my critical approaches have much in common with past studies and critical work on Australian poetry. For example, the issue-centred and poet-centred approach of each chapter can be aligned with Judith Wright's approach of 1966, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry.* Similarly, by mapping the American influences in Peter Minter's poetry my criticism follows the 'American model' of John Tranter in his introduction to *The New Australian Poetry* (1979), Martin Duwell's doctoral thesis of 1988, *"That source of so much of our continuing inspiration": American Poetry and Some Australian Poets of the 1960s and 1970s* (1988), and Joan Kirkby's *The American Model: Influence and Independence in Australian Poetry* (1982). My approach to embodied poetry can be aligned with the pluralist feminist literary criticism of *Poetry and Gender,* which as Walker points out is necessarily eclectic because "feminist inquiry itself" is diverse and "supports complementary and sometimes contradictory practices" (5). And my approach to John Mateer's poetry resonates with the culturally orientated criticism of Sneja Gunew in *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations* and *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies.* While there are many differences amongst these similarities, generally the critical approaches of my thesis are not radically different from those practised by Australia's critics for many years. This thesis does not suggest that a revolutionary 'new' way of reading is required for new nineties poetries. This thesis argues that new nineties poetries are an eclectic assemblage which require equally eclectic critical approaches. The cohesive element of this thesis is an ethical approach which respects the 'spirit of eclecticism' of new nineties poets and their poetries.

### Calling for Criticism

My thesis addresses a need for criticism of new poetry. Like Mateer's call for "in-depth criticism", Martin Duwell's *Australian* article, tellingly entitled "Unsung poetry falls on

deaf ears", decries the current dearth of criticism: "A lack of good critics means our poetry is in danger of becoming a trackless desert of terrific poems and poets we know almost nothing about" (2000). Duwell warns that "a culture that doesn't take its own poetry deadly seriously is a mere buffoon in the family of nations" and calls for serious criticism to prevent this charge of buffoonery. Duwell comments that "there is still a lot of good, knowledgeable work being done with contemporary novels and plays" but asks "[W]hy is poetry suffering?". Part of the answer to this question can be found in the current state of universities all over Australia: English departments are being closed down or reduced to half their size. This is not the place to discuss the dominance of economic rationalism or the replacement of the study of literature with media and technologically based arts, but poetry that is intensely involved in investigating the constructive nature of language and what that means for subjects living in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries should be listened to.

## *Chapters*

Each chapter focuses on an issue that is of interest to many new nineties poets: chapter two focuses on language; chapter three on embodiment; chapter four on cultural difference and chapter five on violence.

Chapter 1, "Seductive Lyricism and Wild Experimentation: A Post-Language Poetics of Peter Minter's 'Empty Texas' Series", discusses the ways in which Minter's "Empty Texas" is both innovative and traditional. I suggest that in a field like the Australian poetry world which is often hostile to experimental poetry, Minter's combination of language/poetic experimentation with traditional lyricality plays an enabling role in the

reception of his poetry. To understand the experimentation of the "Empty Texas" series the influences of the poetics of American Language writing are mapped. I explicate some of the key points of the Language writers' project(s) and explore the conjugative relationship which emerges as Minter works both with and against the poetics of Language writing. The term 'post-Language' is used to draw attention to the influence of the poetics of American Language writing in the "Empty Texas" series and position Minter as emerging after Language writing. 'Post-Language' is a term being used in contemporary American poetry criticism to discuss the poets and their poetry, who have emerged in the 1990s in the shadow of Language poetry. Unlike the American situation, Minter and other innovative poets in Australia are not overshadowed by an influential group of poets from the 1980s and have been able to obtain valuable cultural capital and publishing space without impediment. As poetry editor of *Meanjin* Minter is perceived as one of the most influential of the new nineties poets, and as winner of the esteemed Dinny O'Hearn Poetry Prize in the *Age* Book of the Year Award, he is regarded as one of the most acclaimed of the new nineties poets. I discuss this 'rise to fame' with Peter Minter and include some of his comments about important issues like the acknowledgement of privilege – to be in positions where we can sit around and talk about poetry – and the responsibilities that come with such privilege. I conclude with a brief discussion of *Morning, Hyphen,* a series published as a chapbook and written some time after the "Empty Texas" series (though they were published at approximately the same time), and sketch the poethical workings of that series as a future direction for poetry criticism on Minter's poetry.

Chapter 2, "Embracing Embodiment: A Poetics of Embodied Reading and Writing", discusses poetry focused on 'the body' and advocates that this type of poetry challenges

poetry criticism to become embodied. My use of the term embodiment refers to 'writing the body' as subject matter, as theme, as preoccupation, and as a writing mode. To demonstrate this type of poetry I create a pastiche of embodied poetry from poems by a diverse gathering of twelve new nineties poets including francesca da rimini, David Herkt, Keri Glastonbury, Peter Minter, Hazel Smith, Tracy Ryan, Shane Rowlands, Jordie Albiston, Alison Croggon, Marcella Polain and MTC Cronin. Embodied poetry is concerned with subject matters which involve the body, such as pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, miscarriage, menstruation, sex and lovemaking, preparing food, eating food, and multiple other activities. Embodied experiences are part of the vital processes involved in the exploration of subjectivities. I suggest that poems which include the oozing, pulsing body provide an opportunity for poetry criticism to be free of the "fiction of the disembodied scholar" (Waldby 17) and to attend to the experiences poetry offers. I do not suggest that this is the only way to read and write poetry criticism on these poems, but it is a form of criticism that emanates from the poetry. That is, rather than applying an arbitrary framework of criticism, the poems directed my critical writing and provided an appropriate approach. Part of this process involved attending to the performative aspects of embodied poetry and the role this plays in the reading processes. Rather than narrate an embodied experience, poems perform by utilising the materiality of language as the pivotal poetic device. The challenges of embodied poetry are treated as gifts to be embraced by poetry criticism, even if as in the case of Rebecca Edwards' poetry, that means confronting the pain of embodiment. Rather than shy away from the difficulties of poems that seem more strange than familiar, I suggest that critically engaging with the poems on their terms – in an embodied mode – is not only an appropriate form of criticism but a productive critical practice.

Chapter 3, "Engaging Cultural Difference: John Mateer's Poetics of Hybridity", focuses on the poetry of John Mateer, a South African born Australian, and his engagement with different cultures. Central to this engagement are the issues of identity, language, and the environment or a sense of place. I discuss Mateer's poetry through the critical framework of Ien Ang's politics of hybridity which provides a way of focusing on the "complicated entanglement" involved when different cultures connect and clash (3). One of the cultures Mateer's poetry attempts to connect with is Australian Aboriginal culture. He presents this cultural entanglement as complicated and problematic, "riven with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict" as Ang suggests of the politics of hybridity (18). As well as elucidating Mateer's poetics of hybridity my poetry criticism enacts a politics of hybridity by attending to the collision between Mateer's poetics and Indigenous readings of his poetry. The impetus for this criticism is a public reading event at Fremantle Arts Centre Press at which Mateer and Indigenous writer Kim Scott read. Scott raised objections to Mateer's poetry claiming that he had no right to write about Aboriginal issues in his poems "The Brewery Site" and "In the Presence of a Severed Head". To understand Scott's objections I incorporated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Board's cultural protocol documents into my critical framework (Quiggan, *Performing Cultures* and *Song Cultures* 2002; Janke, *New Media Cultures*, *Visual Cultures*, and *Writing Cultures* 2002). My critical practice reveals an extreme disjunction between the two different forms of politics operating in contemporary Australia and the way they are played out in the literary milieu.

In Chapter 4, "dark bare death's speaking human words" "But the Poems are beautiful": Emma Lew's Dark & Violent Poetry" I discuss the way Lew's poetry creates profoundly moving poetry. Unlike the other chapters which focus on issues shared amongst a

number of new nineties poets, this chapter is more poet-centered rather than issue-centered. I found it necessary to adjust the framework for this chapter because Emma Lew's poetry is almost impossible to discuss via a singular issue and I have found no other new nineties poetry similar to it. This of course produces a dilemma for my thesis – Lew just refuses to fit into the framework! However, to not include Lew's poetry on the grounds that it forms an incongruity in my critical framework, or to use my critical 'ingenuity' to force her poetry to fit, is equally problematic. By drawing attention to the structural dilemmas Lew's poetry has produced for the form of my thesis highlights one of the (frequently unacknowledged) processes that operate in the production of seemingly seamless critical texts. I have included Emma Lew's poetry in my thesis because it is passionate and interesting and thus offers exciting challenges for poetry criticism.

The reviews of Lew's poetry demonstrate that most readers relate to the poems experientially and predominately focus on the way meaning is sensed rather than intellectually understood. As Lew's poetics is motivated by a desire for feeling, for poetry that makes us feel, I suggest that her poems challenge poetry critics and their critical writings to acknowledge the importance of the emotional quality of a poem and the role of feeling in the reading experiences of her poems. I discuss the *Quadrant* controversy in which Patrick McCauley vehemently objects to the attention and acclaim Lew has received (McCauley 2002). His objection is based on his disapproval of Lew's creative processes, which he defines as the postmodern "cut-up" method, but as I reveal McCauley's response to Lew reading her poems at the Water Rat Hotel in Melbourne resonates with the deeply moving experiences emphasised by the reviewers. Rather than dismiss Lew's poetry as an example of postmodern pretension or nihilism, I draw upon

her biographical details to suggest that a post-Holocaustic framework is more appropriate.

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[1] Croggon's poetry collections: *This is the Stone*; *The Blue Gate*; *Attempts at Being*; *Common Flesh: New and Selected Poems*. Croggon's fantasy novels: *Pellinor: The Treesong Trilogy: The Gift*; *The Riddle*; *The Crow; The Singing* (forthcoming 2008). Croggon's novella: *Navigatio*. Croggon is also a prolific playwright.

[2] Edwards' poetry collections: *Eating the Experience*; *Scar Country*; *Draw a Lion and Other Poems*. Edwards' verse novel: *Holiday Coast Medusa*. Edwards' children's fiction: *The River Sai*.

[3] Minter's poetry collections: *Rhythm in a Dorsal Fin*; *Empty Texas*; *Morning, Hyphen*; *blue grass*.

[4] Mateer's poetry collections: *Burning Swans*; *Anachronism*; *Echo*; *Mister! Mister! Mister!*; *Spitting Out Seeds*; *Barefoot Speech*; *Loanwords*; *The Brewery Site: Six Poems*; *The Ancient Capital of Images*. Mateer's travel writing: *Semar's Cave: An Indonesian Journal*. Mateer's book essay on art: *Brian McKay* (artwork by McKay).

[5] Lew's poetry collections: *The Wild Reply*; *Anything the Landlord Touches*.

[6] Albiston's poetry collections: *Nervous Arcs*; *Botany Bay Documents*; *My Secret Life and Other Poems*; *The Fall*; *Vertigo (a Cantata)*.

[7] Boyle's poetry collections: *Coming Home from the World*; *The Blue Cloud of Crying*; *Acceptance of Silent Waters*; *What the Painter Saw in Our Faces*; *November in Madrid and Other Poems*; *Museum of Space*.

[8] Bellear's poetry collection: *Dreaming in Urban Areas*.

[9] Polain's poetry collections: *Dumbstruck*; *Each Clear Night*.

[10] Heiss' poetry collection: *Token Koori*. Heiss' social observation publication*: I'm Not Racist, But…: A Collection of Social Observations*.

[11] Cronin's poetry collections: *Zoetrope: We See Us Moving; Everything Holy*; *The World Beyond the Fig*; *Bestseller*; *Talking to Neruda's Questions*; *My Lover's Back*; *The Confetti Stone and Other Poems*; *Beautiful, Unfinished: Parable/Song/Canto/Poem*; *The Flower, the Thing: A Book of Flowers and Dedications*; *Our Life is a Box: Prayers Without a God*.

[12] Ryan's poetry collections: *Killing Delilah*; *Bluebeard in Drag*; *Intensities of Blue; Lines of Sight*; *Ex Opere Operato*; *The Willing Eye*; *Hothouse*. Ryan's short story: *Conspiracies*.

[13] Wagan Watson's poetry collections: *Of Muse, Meandering and Midnight*; *Hotel Bone*; *Itinerant Blues*; *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*; *Three Legged Dogs and Other Poems*. Wagan Watson's audio disc (with Brett Dionysius and Liz Hall-Downs): *Blackfellas Whitefellas Wetlands: Poetry and Music from Boondall Wetlands*. Wagan Watson's short story: *Black Man Down*.

[14] Jill Jones' poetry collections: *The Mask and the Jagged Star*; *Flagging Down Time*; *Invisible Ink*; *The Book of Possibilities*; *Screens Jets Heaven: New and Selected Poems*; *Where the Sea Burns and Other Poems*; *Fold Unfold; Broken/Open*.

[15] Lewis' poetry collections: *Song for the Quartet*; *High Country*.

[16] Wiggins poetry collections: *The Beggar's Codex*.

[17] Compton's poetry collections: *From the Other Woman; Blue*; *Brick and Other Poems*; *Parker and Quink*.

[18] Kent's poetry collections: *Verandahs*; *Practising Breathing*; *The Satin Bowerbird*; *The Spaghetti Maker and Other Poems*.

[19] Brett Dionysius' poetry collections: *Fatherlands*; *Bacchanalia*; *Universal Andalusia*. Dionysius' audio disc (with Sam Wagan Watson and Liz Hall-Downs): *Blackfellas Whitefellas Wetlands: Poetry and Music from Boondall Wetlands*.

[20] Kelly's poetry collections: *Coming Up for Light*; *City and Stranger*; *The Passion Paintings: Poems 1983-2006*. Kelly's children's picture book: *The Wollondilly Bunyip and the Koala*.

[21] Emery's poetry collections: *And Dug My Fingers in the Sand*; *Misplaced Heart*; *Uncommon Light*.

[22] McBryde's poetry collections: *Silvers*; *Domain*; *Ambulance and Other Poems*; *Ground Floor*; *The Still Company*; *Equatorial*; *Flank*; *The Familiar*; *The Shade of Angels*.

[23] Taylor's poetry collections: *First Language*; *Renovating and Other Poems*. Taylor's books for children: *If the World Belonged to Dogs*; *If Bees Rode Shiny Bicycles*.

[24] Farrell's poetry collections: *Break Me Ouch*; *Ode Ode*; *I'cing: Eight Poems*.

[25] Dougan's poetry collections: *Memory Shell*; *White Clay*.

[26] Attfield's poetry collection: *Hope in Hell*.

[27] Murray's poetry collections: *Jaywalking Blues*; *The Blackbird Crisis and Other Poems*; *Geology*.

[28] Westbury's poetry collections: *Our Houses are Full of Smoke*; *Surface Tension*; *Mouth to Mouth*; *Flying Blind*.

[29] Gibian's poetry collections: *The Body's Navigations*; *Ardent*.

[30] Hull's poetry collections: *I Will Never Live in Mosman*; *Battery Hen*; *Psychic Gun*; *Notes From the Big Park*; *Bestiary*; *A Crocodile's Daydream: Poems on Insects, Birds and Reptiles*; *Branto We Dream: New and Selected Dog Poems*; *Vegan, Vegas*; *A Note For Johnny*; *Landscape Photography With Dogs*; *Point-Blank-Poor*; *Rose Street Archaeology*; *How Do Detectives Make Love?*; *Broken Land: 5 Days in Bre, 1995*; *William's Mongrels*; *In The Dog Box of Summer* (plus a number of ebooks, information available at <http://www.thylazine.org/coralhull/>).
Hull's novellas: *Gangsters, &, The City of Detroit is Inside Me: Two Novellas*.

[31] Graham's poetry collections: *Land Window*.

[32] Harrison's poetry collections: *Folly and Grief*; *Changzhuo's Bees and Other Poems*; *Dear B*; *Cabramatta/Cudmirrah*; *Michelangelo's Prisoners*; *Mosaics and Mirrors: composite poems*.

[33] Yu's poetry collections: *Listening To*; *er du piao liu/Second Drifting*; *New and Selected Poems*; *xiandu/The Limit*; *Foreign Matter*; *Wo Cao*; *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-Coloured Eyes*; *Moerben Zhi Xia/The Summer of Melbourne*; *Moon Over Melbourne*. Yu's collection of essays: *Bia: Offensively Chinese/Australian: A Collection of Essays on China and Australia*.

[34] Burke's poetry collection: *Night Song and Other Poems*.

[35] Glastonbury's poetry collections: *Hygienic Lilly*; *Super-Regional*.

[36] Reid's poetry collections: *A Difficult Faith*; *Parochial*; *Bitter Suite*.

[37] Ross' poetry collections: *B Grade*; *Je Ne Sais Quoi*; *En Passant*.

[38] Brophy's poetry collections: *Mr Wittgenstein's Lion*; *Forty-Five Years on a Bicycle and Other Poems*; *Portrait in Skin*; *Seeing Things*; *Replies to the Questionnaire on Love*. Brophy's fiction: *What Men and Women Do*; *The Hole Through the Centre of the World*; *Visions*; *Getting Away With It*. Brophy's collection of essays: *Explorations in Creative Writing*.

[39] Kenneally's poetry collections: *Harmers Haven*; *Around Here*; *All Day All Night*; *Ci Vediamo*.

[40] Mercer's poetry collections: *Handfeeding the Crocodile*; *Night Breathing and Other Poems*; *The Ocean in the Kitchen*. Mercer's fiction: *Parachute Silk: Friends, Food, Passion: A Novel in Letters*.

[41] Nielsen's poetry collections: *Search Engine*; *Wet Robot*.

[42] William's poetry collections: *Bad Love Poems*; *Driven to Talk to Strangers*; *Eloquent and Other Poems*; *High and Low*; *Invisible Tattoos*; *The Sad Anthropologist*; *User Pays*.

[43] Kissane's poetry collections: *Every Night They Dance*; *Facing the Moon*; *Glass Dreams and Other Poems*.

[44] Heald's poetry collections: *Focusing Saturn*; *Body-Flame*; *Shorelines: Three Poets*. Heald's thesis: *Confidences: Aspects of the Poem-Reader Relationship in Five Contemporary Western Australian Poets*.

[45] Herkt's poetry collection: *The Body of Man*.

[46] Ryan's poetry collections: *A Paddock in His Head*; *Why I Am Not A Farmer*; *Mungo Poems*; *Bare Me Days*.

[47] de Paor's poetry collections: *Cork and Other Poems*; *Sentences of Earth and Stone*; *Freckled Weather*.

# CHAPTER 1
## Seductive Lyricism and Wild Experimentation:
## A Post-Language Poetics of Peter Minter's
## "Empty Texas" Series

### Introduction

Peter Minter's "Empty Texas" series is one of the most linguistically innovative of all new nineties poetries. Originally published as a pamphlet, this series is the second and middle section of Minter's second collection, *Empty Texas*. The central position and the eponymous title of the collection highlight the importance of the series and distinguish it from the more conventional poems in the other two sections[1]. This chapter focuses on Minter's linguistically innovative or experimental poetry, in particular the "Empty Texas" series and concludes with a discussion of another innovative series, *Morning, Hyphen* (published as a pamphlet after the *Empty Texas* collection). Minter's linguistic innovations are informed by postmodern concepts of language which recognise the constructive and constitutive forces of language; refute language as a 'natural' or transparent entity; acknowledge that meaning-making processes are contingent, marked by undecidability and that meaning is multiple rather than singular. Like Haraway's cyborg politics, Minter's poetry is concerned with investigating the 'limits of language', the affects of technology and the processes of postmodern subjectivity. Minter's poetry works with a concept of subjectivity that is unstable and constantly in process; 'Nature' is not determinative, for subjectivity is constituted and constructed by language, society, social class, capitalism and technology. Because of the constitutive and constructive role of language in postmodern concepts of

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[1] Minter's poetry can be divided into two forms or styles in the same way that critics distinguish two forms in John Kinsella's oeuvre. However, rather than publish them as separate collections, as Kinsella does, Minter's *Empty Texas* collection combines the different poetic approaches.

subjectivity and reality, innovative poetry engaged with these issues offers insight into these important topics. Minter's poetry engages with what it means to be a subject in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and *imagines* ways of 'becoming' and living in postmodernity.

Minter's imaginings of postmodern subjectivity resonate with the positive approach of Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern ethics in that he offers positive ways of 'becoming' – living, thinking, feeling – in a chaotic world. Like Bauman's postmodern ethics, Minter's poetry imagines "novel ways" of living in postmodernity (*Postmodern Ethics* 4). The 'novel ways' of a positive postmodern ethics involve the acknowledgement and acceptance of the conditions of postmodernity which include ambiguity, ambivalence, diversity, difference and contradiction, while the modernist values of universalism and foundationalism are deemed inappropriate and obsolete. This chapter discusses Minter's innovative poetry in relation to the 'novel ways' or possibilities open to ways of imagining postmodern subjectivity. The first part of the chapter discusses the "Empty Texas" series and its critique of the erasure of subjectivity, which is one of the 'novel ways' offered by American Language poetry. The conclusion of the chapter reads the *Morning, Hyphen* series as a development of Minter's poetics of postmodern subjectivity and focuses on the concept of mobile subjectivity as it pertains to living in postmodernity.

This does not imply that Minter's poetry provides the 'do-it-yourself' remedy of postmodern subjectivity; on the contrary, poetry that engages with these complex issues in innovative ways, as Minter's does, is equally complex and difficult. Part of this difficulty is due to the philosophical aspect of the poetry: this is poetry concerned with thinking and *imagining* ways

of 'becoming' in postmodernity. The other important reason for the difficulty of Minter's poetry arises from the experimental element of the poetry. Minter's experimental or linguistic innovations are informed by a postmodern aesthetics dominated by intense self-reflexivity, unfamiliar stanza formation or an absence of stanzas, irregular line lengths, unconventional grammatical structures, peculiar syntax, ellipsis, non-sequiturs, metonymic and serial composition, obscure language, fragmented and arbitrary construction, non-linear or discontinuous narrative and thematic progress, and many other poetic techniques that have come to be defined as postmodern. In a postmodern world characterized by chaos and the absence of preordained order, postmodern poets like Minter devise their own order and are free to investigate the limits of language and poetic form accordingly. Not surprisingly these linguistic innovations create intensely difficult and challenging poems and the "Empty Texas" series is indeed unusually difficult.

There are various other new nineties poets who are interested in linguistic innovations and their poetry if often challenging or difficult. Some of these poets include Michael Brennan, MTC Cronin, Jane Gibian, David Herkt, Melissa Curran, Michael Farrell, Adrian Wiggins, Susan Bower, Morgan Yasbincek and the poets focused on in the other three chapters, Alison Croggon, John Mateer and Emma Lew. Other extremely innovative poets who are not technically new nineties poets but have published just outside of the dates 1990 to 2000 include Louis Armand, Kate Fagan and Geraldine McKenzie. Like Minter, not all of the poems by these poets are experimental or linguistically unconventional; some collections may contain one or two experimental poems while the other poems may be more conventional in form and content. Before I proceed further, clarification of the terms 'experimental' and 'linguistic innovation' will be helpful as it is not necessarily evident what is

meant when poetry criticism (or criticism of art generally) makes use of these terms. Certainly there is a general understanding that the terms 'experimental' and 'linguistic innovation' refer to poetry that is unconventional in some way. In this chapter it is Minter's unconventional use of language and form that define the experimental aspects. For example, the poems in the "Empty Texas" series frequently feature irregular and erratic margins, stanzas, line lengths, spacing and fonts, as '*Reputation*' demonstrates:

Look, you would say, how the sky falls
                        perhaps, a million times ask the phosphorescent distance of
                                    Those Things,
                        what have you experienced
never getting started, exhaustively inclined towards 'costs'
            *you carry with you now*
                                    Prescented Imagery and laughter, imperfect
design & production spared by
the comedy – *Witz ist ein Blitz! healthy breasts bounce*
                        *on your Italian leather sofa!*

Well, we'll have your Cake and give it
two angles, when she said
                *I want the Vogue shot first, then the Style plate –*
                                    *all those People! think of Us*
*Turkey de la Wig – 'Poetry and Desiccated Egos'*
                *vanishing in series*
                *of Scratch and Smell editorials!* (48)

Other new nineties poets experiment with formal arrangements in similar ways. Many of David Herkt's poems cascade down and across the page:

            Kissed life into him
            mouth to mouth

as mist will rise from the earth
to moisten the cracked clay-pans
                        & wet the stones with shine.

            Entered into his flesh
            & breathed into his throat

& his earthen voice was raw
sound in the evening's air
                the outcry of his sex.

Although not typical of Alison Croggon's oeuvre, 'Notes' makes use of cascading, zigzagging lines:

> the angle of your face
>            between my thighs –
>                  the thousand notes
>                          of your lucid tongue –
>                                  the taut fruits
>                  shivering to wakefulness
>            against my lips –
> o trees may embrace
>            as slowly and completely
>                  the solemn earth
>                          and the unquenchable light
>                                  and know the joy of sap
>                  sweetly engorging them – (*The Blue Gate* 40).

There are various different arrangements utilised by new nineties poets interested in linguistic and formal innovation. The following poem by MTC Cronin divides the poem into two columns:

> The painting over the stove          My mother bought on the
> Left Bank when she was          Nineteen and a sailor gave
> Her a sheer black scarf          Embroidered with metallic
> Gold. I have the scarf too          And a lid on the pot so
> Sauce doesn't spit high          Into the air. There are
> (*Everything Holy*, 'Bouillabaisse Her Image of His Head' 32).

Even though a capital demarks a new sentence in the second column, the line reads across the divide so we are not to read one column at a time as might be expected by some readers. Jane Gibian's 'And what she found' divides the poem into three columns without any capitals to demarcate new sentences to direct the reading path:

> in the          their bodies          of an
> muted          become          endless
> yellow          at once          spiral its
> light his          weightless &          edges
> face so          unbelievably          blurred &
> calm          heavy          glowing
> (*The Body's Navigation* 87).

Unlike Cronin's columns, Gibian's columns are to be read as a line. Coral Hull's poems are

unconventionally organised in blocks of aligned text like paragraphs:

> if me brother never loved nothin' else in the world 'e loved
> 'is dog. i know this tar be true 'cause I often seen the joy of
> 'im shinin' in the dog's eyes when the sunlight hit 'em. the
> dog showed me the things that me brother don't tell me
> never. 'e aint never spoke much or showed much love tar no
> one. (*William's Mongrels,* 'Dog' 245)

These paragraphs are not conventional because they do not include capitals to define

sentences, 'I' is not capitalized and the colloquial language is not conventionally 'poetic'

because it seeks to present the voice of a subject who is rarely given space in poetry.


Another feature of linguistically innovative poetry is a quality of self-reflexivity which can

include an emphasised focus on the issues of language generally, or more specifically it can

involve attending to writing poetry as the following by Louis Armand demonstrates:

> turning pages like tarot cards
> & trying to find
> in those ever empty spaces
> a prophesy a testament a destination:
>
>    –  *i am writing my way back towards this moment*  (*Séances*, 'Prologue [In Memoriam]' 13).

In the following poem by Melissa Curran self-reflexivity attends to the gender issues of

writing:

> **she**
>
> writes like a man. that. is she writes. not like a. man  but  like.
> someone for.whom words exist outside.the.body.she has.never
> been pregnant.with words writing.for herisanactof.penetration
> a.rape the bloodied. distance between skin  and  text  women's.
> words make her body. ache they.are.foetal their.birth  like  the
> stars' is. violent it results in.clarity. (*The Long Drowning* 14)

Croggon's poetry is often self-reflexive about the way language can be used:

> This of course has nothing to do with words which
> may be hammered into atoms or dressed in tulle
> whatever you like they will do what you say
> obediently, biding their time.
> They'll outlast you anyway. (*Attempts at Being*, 'Language' 110)

The last line of the above acknowledges a postmodern concept of language which recognises that language has its own powers and is less a tool than a constructive force in society.

Experimenting, pushing language to its limits to form innovative poetry usually involves some form of subversion of language. Formal arrangements are a type of subversion of conventional stanzas, lines and the way a poem appears on the page. Other important innovations occur grammatically and syntactically and it is these linguistic experiments that create the most difficult poetry. Linguistically innovative poetry is composed of unconventional grammar and syntax, non-sequiturs, ellipsis, obscure language and various other techniques which form postmodern aesthetic practices. While the poems of the "Empty Texas" series are formally innovative with their irregular line lengths, zigzagging alignment and unexplained italics, it is the grammatical and syntactical structure that causes the most difficulty for reading and comprehension.

> The massacre hits town & your complete curiosity
> helps us feel writing,
> the fake play touching down into finity, the atmosphere
> swept over constantly
>
> *I used to swim the quiet lake & green blue whisper*
>
> so you're a bit hopeful, up to theory,
> tho seem to fade as I question your health, drifting with
> uncertain temper
>
> and all winter long
> legs calmly cover sacred ground
> amidst Smart Women, Rimbaud and
> *The Red Net*
> snaps adrift objectively

> (without meaning or silence
> behind leaves, underwater
> the table laid & lashing out,
> apologetic finches
> skipping foam damp confetti
>
> to call up correspondences, projective peace
> & your head bursting
> into *my* grave, standing
>
> still The Naked and the perfect bowl
> are over it, or so she wanted you to tell,
>
> *I will never know, the way the world lies, deep shadows in the wind drop*
> *folding under buoys.* ('*Bliss*' 49)

Without conventional grammar and syntactical structure, reading cues are missing. For example, are we to understand that the table is underwater? How can a table lash out? How can someone put their head into a grave? And perhaps stranger than someone putting their head into a grave is the idea that it is the grave of the subject of the poem (emphasised with italics, "*my* grave"). We might ask, who is the subject of the description 'The Naked'? Grammatically and syntactically it seems that the "bowl" is naked and perfect, and while a bowl can be perfect, how can it be naked? Furthermore, the capitalisation of "The Naked" suggest that this is not a description of the bowl but a subject in its own right. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the linguistic innovations of the "Empty Texas" series create some of the most difficult of all new nineties poems.

The challenge for poetry critics is to find a critical approach that provides a way into these difficult poems. In this chapter I suggest that an influence-orientated approach provides one of the most informative ways of understanding what Minter is doing in the "Empty Texas" series. My criticism of Minter's poetry does not seek to paraphrase each poem and thus 'solve' the riddle of these complex poems – a perhaps impossible and certainly absurd task –

but it does offer a thorough elucidation of the way in which Minter both *simultaneously*
*incorporates and criticises* one of the most influential group of American poets of the late
twentieth century. My influence-orientated approach proposes that the "Empty Texas"
series is demonstrative of a post-Language poetics (or post- L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E).
That is, the "Empty Texas" series can be read in relation to and in response to the
postmodern poetics of American Language poetry. Minter's response is interesting because
it contests aspects of the poetics of American Language poetry at the same time that it
makes use of other aspects. Unlike the oppositional approach and rhetoric that usually
accompanies the emergence of innovative and experimental poetry, Minter's poetics is
characterised by respectful engagement and playful criticism – an approach in keeping with
positive postmodern ethics. American poetry critic, Joseph Conte, calls upon Matei
Calinescu to explain this impulse in postmodern poetry:

> Typically, the avant-garde, as the experimental cutting edge of modernity, has
> historically given itself a double task: to destroy and to invent. But negation certainly
> is the most significant moment in the twofold logic of radical innovation: it is the
> old, the institutionalised past, the Library and the Museum, that must be effectively
> rejected, demystified, torn down; the new – unanticipated, radiant, abrupt – will
> follow by itself.
>
> In postmodernism, it has been observed, it is precisely this purely destructive aspect
> of the old avant-garde that comes under question. What could justify so much
> ruthless devastation? Is this the price to be paid for access to the new? But the new, a
> relative value, not an absolute one, cannot be worth such a steep, exorbitant price.
> Abandoning the strictures of the avant-garde and opting for a logic of renovation
> rather than radical innovation, postmodernism has entered into a lively
> reconstructive dialogue with the old and the past. (*Five Faces of Modernity* 276-275, in
> Conte *Unending Design* 10)

Rather than destruction, Minter's post-Language poetics involves "mutation (gradual change
as an articulation of difference), fusion (the synthesis of diverse attributes to produce a
distinctly new quality), and renovation (reviving the castoffs and misfits of formerly
threadbare poetics)" (Conte 11). This 'synthesis' is *not* a "typical" approach of "any

(modernist) revolution in art" (as Philip Mead states of the oppositional approach and rhetoric of the Generation of '68, "The American Model II" 173).  It is, as James McCorkle states, particular to the "postmodern . . . condition connecting ethics and aesthetics" and the "postmodern poetics that is an ongoing reinterpretation of the self in the context of others" ("The Inscription of Postmodern Poetry" 46).  Thus, the non-oppositional position of Minter's postmodern poetics reveals a form of respect for the 'other' of American Language poetry which is both aesthetic and ethical.


## *Methodology: American Influence*

American poetry has always been influential in Australia and this is most evident in the case of the Australian poets who emerged in the late sixties and early seventies, those known as the 'Generation of '68'.  These poets were heavily influenced by America's early sixties poets including the Beats (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder), the New York School (John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler) and the Black Mountain or Projectivist poets (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Hilda Morley, John Wieners, Robert Duncan).  John Tranter emphasises the importance of American poetry in his introduction to the anthology that was largely responsible for the establishment of the 'Generation of '68', *The New Australian Poetry* (1979):

> the strongest direct influence was from America, in the form of the new poetry that emerged there in the early 1960s.  And here, the effect of two books was incalculable – Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1960) and Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1962).  They were big, various, and completely new, and when they finally arrived in Australia in the mid-1960s (Donald Allen's book was banned for several years) they showed the local writers that there was a real and vigorous alternative to the world of Henry Lawson and A.D. Hope. (xvii)

Martin Duwell's doctoral thesis on these poets, *'That source of so much of our continuing inspiration': American Poetry and Some Australian Poets of the 1960s and 1970s* (1988), demonstrates that mapping American influence is an effective convention in Australian poetry criticism. Joan Kirkby's monograph *The American Model: Influence and Independence in Australian Poetry* (1982) is also evidence of the importance of this approach. As demonstrated by Philip Mead's recent criticism on Australian poetry this approach remains an effective and valid methodology. Mead's chapter in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (2003) is tellingly entitled "The American Model II" and presents Tranter and Kinsella's poetry within a "cross-cultural reading of [American] Language writing" (186).

I am not suggesting that an influence-orientated approach is appropriate or equally informative for all linguistically innovative new nineties poets. Certainly there are those who are influenced by American Language poetry, Michael Brennan is one example, as are Kate Fagan and Louis Armand (not technically new nineties poets), but Minter's "Empty Texas" series is unique because it explicitly engages with the poetics of American Language poetry. However, nor am I suggesting that an influence-orientated approach is the definitive approach and no doubt a variety of approaches will be utilised in the future. Nor are the American Language poets the only influence in Minter's poetics. It would be equally appropriate to map the important influence of Robert Adamson or Charles Olsen in Minter's poetics or just as equally appropriate to attend to the multiplicity of influences. As Minter states, the "Empty Texas" series is "not necessarily just about Language Writing, but more a broad range of poetic styles and influences" ("A Sunday Morning Chat" 43). However, reading the series in the context of Language poetry provides an effective way into

its complexities and difficulties, it reveals a form of dialogue between Minter's and American Language poets' poetics and emphasises different ways of dealing with postmodern subjectivity.

A traditional approach like mapping influences may seem at odds with the radical or avant-garde poetry of Peter Minter. If one term has become synonymous with Minter's poetry it is not 'traditional', but innovative. Comments on the back cover of *Empty Texas* emphasise the innovative aspects: Kate Lilley describes the poetry as "experiments in the syntax of the organic", while John Kinsella acclaims it as "one of the Australian volumes of the decade: innovative, intelligent, . . . it's as if David Lynch has written a screen play of the life of Alfred Jarry". Likewise, the reviews of Minter's poetry repeatedly define it in this way. Keen to support a fellow innovator, Louis Armand's *Meanjin* review describes Minter as "daring" and claims that his poetry will "send a resounding *'Merde!'* through the largely placid theatre of Australian letters" (189). Emphasising the revolutionary innovation of this collection Armand concludes that "Minter's poetry does not wait upon the permission of any of the prevailing orthodoxies. He has posed an enormous challenge to writing in Australia" (189-190). Gig Ryan further enhances Minter's reputation as an innovator when she emphasises the way he discovers "what doesn't exist yet" to "make new" poetry ("Words to Conjure With"). Pam Brown's *Sydney Morning Herald* review describes *Empty Texas* as both "innovative" and experimental (10), and Rodney Pybus' *Stand* review hails the "Empty Texas" series as "experimental and exploratory", giving Minter "full marks . . . for making his experiments in a new Oz poetics so consistently sharp and imaginative" (123-124). Philip Mead's *Australian Book Review* article also attends to Minter's "experiment in language and form" (37). My influence-orientated approach attends to these experiments in language,

contextualises them within the poetics of American Language writing, and suggests that Minter's engagement with Language poetry involves an adoption of their experimental linguistic practices while simultaneously rejecting their approach to postmodern subjectivity. From this context Minter's post-Language poetics can be understood and the possibilities for postmodern subjectivity he articulates can be discussed.

Like all 'post' terms, post-Language marks a period: in this case it is after Language writing. It does not signify the end of Language poets and their writing, for they continue to write and publish, and have become one of the most influential poetry movements of the late twentieth-century. The main purpose of the term 'post-Language' is to attend to a poetics that is influenced by Language writing. As Silliman states in his discussion of the shifting nature of Language writing, those poets emerging since Language poetry demonstrate a form of influence: "there are several hundred interesting younger writers publishing works that openly reflect some influence, hostile as well as friendly as well as ambivalent, that can be traced in some fashion to language writing" ("Rev. of *The Marginalization of Poetry* by Bob Perelman"). Silliman may have those "interesting younger writers" emerging in America in mind, but the current situation or "new internationalism" as it has been referred to by Kinsella ("Poets Cornered")[2], reveals that the influence of Language writing has reached Australia's poets. The influence of Language writing is repeatedly mentioned by the reviews

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[2] Thomas Shapcott's review of *Calyx* (in *Australian Book Review*) is entitled "New Internationalism" but this is not related to American influence; it is specifically connected to a European influence which is supposedly evident in the inclusion of Louis Armand whose poetry is "the model, the exemplar" for the anthology (50). Shapcott finds Armand's inclusion "bizarre" and claims he receives "top billing" for "didactic purposes". Shapcott does not consider Armand Australian enough to be included in an anthology of Australian poetry: "His poems included here have plenty of Australian references (Bob Adamson, red centers, even Yoern Utzon) but the biographical notes at the end tell us that Armand is not an Australian poet at all, but lives in the Czech Republic." Armand does live in Prague and has lived there since 1994. However, he was born in Australia (which is not mentioned in *Calyx's* biographical details).

of *Calyx;* some perceive this as positive; others as negative.  On the affirmative side is Barbour's *Jacket* review which (under the "Pleasure" heading) declares that "[m]ost of these writers have learned in an international forum, and some of their mentors have been the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the USA" (3).  Brian Matthews' *Times Literary Supplement* review negatively claims that the anthology "amounts to a constrained version of postmodern American poetics. Ashbery appears as presiding paterfamilias in several poems. The self-consciousness about textuality – and the apologies towards theory – of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing underpins much else."  Greg McLaren in *HEAT* suggests that "[o]ne of the striking features of *Calyx* is the proliferation of Language poetry" (250), but his substantial discussion of Language poetry leaves no doubt that it is not to his liking:

> the movement derived its impetus from political/poetic considerations in the U.S. in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. It is hardly innovative any longer. As Kevin Hart notes, in the U.S. 'language poetry…became the new formalism'. I share Hart's criticism of Language poetry: 'with hindsight language poetry seems so academic. People shake their heads and wonder why it once appeared so liberating, so cool.' (250)

Whether one likes or dislikes American Language poetry aside; it is important to understand how it has or is influencing Australia's new poets.  Minter's "Empty Texas" series offers an explicit example of this influence.  Unlike mere adaptations of American poetry (something which the poets of the Generation of '68 were accused of), Minter's simultaneous incorporation and critique of American Language poetry demonstrates an element of the confidence with which new nineties poets write.


## The Poetics of American Language Writing

### Problematic Labels

American Language poetry, or writing as it is frequently called, is a poetic 'movement' that emerged in the late seventies.  Like all groupings of this kind, many different poetic practices

and modes or styles are gathered under the title 'Language poetry'. Like American post-Language poet-critic, Mark Wallace, my discussion of Minter's post-Language poetics requires an understanding of Language poetry, but I recognize the problems inherent in any use of definitive and descriptive terms:

> Defining postlanguage poetry involves defining language poetry also, and defining as well what it means to "come after" that previous literary movement.
>
> It's important to recognize that providing a complete definition of any area of literary activity is impossible, since literature is too multi-faceted, rambunctious, and iconoclastic to fit the limits of any definition. So any definition of an area of writing practice must either be conceived of as limiting, or what is perhaps more useful, as a provisional and partial way of understanding the changing complexities of literary practice. At best, definition should perhaps be seen as a shifting process which enables illuminations about a shifting practice. ("Definitions in Process")

Although American Language poets have defined and established themselves under this title, they also acknowledge the dangers of "labels" emphasising that "[s]logans and catchphrases signal the possibility that stylistic fixation can be entrapment for these as well as other tendencies in recent poetry" (Andrews & Bernstein, "Repossessing The Word"). In order to block a "homogenous group definition from forming into a single heroic identity", Language poets frequently ironise their title with the adjunct of 'so-called': "language poets, so-called" (Silliman, "Rev. of *The Marginalization of Poetry*"). While attempting to present Language poetry as a heterogeneous project or projects, my discussion necessarily summarises the complex poetics that informs this writing in order to provide the unfamiliar reader with an understanding of the main issues involved. My discussion focuses on the *poetics* rather than the poetry of Language writers for a number of reasons. Language writers have written extensively on the poetics that guides their practices because, as American poetry critic and Language poet 'authority' Marjorie Perloff states, they believed "poetics was an intellectual enterprise, deserving a larger place than it had in the Creative Writing classroom of the seventies" ("After Language Poetry"). Thus there is a large, readily available body of work

on the poetics of Language writing. Perloff (and many others) provide comprehensive critical analysis of Language poetry that I will draw upon extensively (see Perloff's *Radical Artifice, Poetic License,* and *21st-Century Modernism* and her many essays, articles and other books). It is not my aim to decide whether the poetic statements of Language writers are successfully accomplished in their poetic practices or whether the politics espoused in their essays is evident in their practices (Perloff covers these topics thoroughly, and George Hartley's *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* is a book dedicated to the latter topic). The purpose of my discussion of Language poetry is to present the "cardinal principles" (Perloff, "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject" 1) of the poetics of Language writing in order to discuss the post-Language poetics of Minter's "Empty Texas" series and the possibilities for postmodern subjectivity presented in his later series, *Morning, Hyphen.*

Further complicating terminology are the shifts that have occurred in the thirty years (approximately) of the life of American Language writing. Language poet Ron Silliman maps "three distinct phases" of Language poetries which are approximately ten year periods ("Rev. of *The Marginalisation of Poetry*"). Silliman claims that the Language poetry of the first ten years is quite different from that of the last ten years. Commenting on the third "current period" he suggests that Language poets have become "more scattered and generally have less contact with one another" which means, as Language poet Lyn Hejinian states, "the differences between us are more and more palpable" (*Salt* interview with Alison Georgeson 257). Despite these changes or shifts, the poetics of Language writing articulated in the earlier periods remain relevant in the latter period, and common to all phases or periods is the postmodern conceptualisation of language as a constructive force of reality and subjectivity.

An important starting point for the establishment of Language writing was the bimonthly journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,* edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. The journal lasted for four years from February 1978. Andrews and Bernstein's anthology *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984) presents a selection from the journal and is an informative collection of essays, statements, and articles by and about American Language poets. In their summary of what they attempted to achieve in the journal, Andrews and Bernstein provide a concise description of the general poetics of Language writing:

> L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E started as a bimonthly magazine of information and commentary, a forum for discussion and interchange. Throughout, we have emphasized a spectrum of writing that places its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter.
> . . .
> our project, if it can be summarized at all, has involved exploring the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized – revealed – produced in writing. This involves an opening of the field of activity and not its premature foreclosure. ("Repossessing the Word" ix)

Prior to the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* journal was Barrett Warren and Robert Grenier's journal *This* (1971). In the first issue of *This,* Grenier's "I HATE SPEECH" "determines the language writers as an historical avant-garde, gaining its originality by splitting from the poetics of the previous avant-garde, the New American Poetry. It obviously initiates an attack on voice-based poetry, and by extension the solidified subject and transparency of language" (Derksen 46). Just as the poets before them, the Beats, the New York School, and the Black Mountain poets (poets of the 60s) rebelled against the impersonal poetry of their predecessors, the "Augustan poetry encouraged by the New Criticism", with their "personal, oral, and 'organic'" poetry (Hoover xxvi), Language poets in turn rebelled against the personal approach of the 60s poets. In many ways 60s poetry was based on the Romantic lyric as espoused by Wordsworth in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* as 'the spontaneous

overflow of powerful feelings' (156).  The poets of the 60s lived in an era that was personally

stifling, and "demanded form, decorum, refinement, and impersonality" (Hoover xxx), and

their poetry sought to subvert these restrictions.  By the late 1970s and 80s a different social

and political environment required different modes of resistance and different poetic

practices, and postmodern and poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity played

a major role in providing these new directions.


Charles Bernstein (Language poet) offers a succinct summary of what is signified with the

term 'Language writing' (I quote extensively to present the various issues I will discuss in

detail):

> The poetry for which I correspond represents less a unified alternative poetics
> than a series of sometimes contentiously related tendencies, or proclivities, and
> especially, shared negations (concerned rejections) of American official verse culture.
> For truly these projects-in-language are not restricted or exclusive; there is no limit to
> those who can, or have, or will participate in this work, which is open-ended and
> without proscriptions: not a matter of Proper Names but of Works, and perhaps not
> even a matter of works but of how readers read them. And maybe those who say
> that the mainstream is a projection, or desperate posturing, and that these alternate,
> alternating, traditions are the active matrix of American poetry, are right. For official
> verse culture, now as always, is under siege, undermining itself, and able to occupy
> only a tiny table at the banquet of culture: decked with medals and pride but notably
> less positioned for access to the stage than many of its designate, and undesignated,
> others.
>    Just now in North America there is an intense density of poetic activity, so that it
> becomes difficult to keep up with all the work that excites interest and involvement.
> The work about which I wish to correspond tends to be preoccupied with finding
> the possibilities for articulation of meanings that are too often denied or repressed by
> a (multinational) culture that we are always being subjected to, that we are indeed
> subjects of, and which, moreover, can be understood as its nowhere explicated
> subject: Poetry which is political not primarily in its subject matter, or representation
> of political causes, however valuable that may be, but in the form and structure and
> style of the poems, and in the attitude toward language.
>    Against the onslaught of a pervasive, and facile, insistence that there is no escape
> from the simulations of commodity culture, it becomes political to hold out for
> meaning: not the meaning that is the prepackaged message of an authorized and
> syntactically normalized, grammatical, decorum; but an always active, probing
> consideration of meaning as social, corporeal, multidimensional; a meaning that is

not fixed but acted out in imperfect, asymmetric counterpoint to the labors that simultaneously engender each day. (*My Way* 106-107)

It is evident from Bernstein's comments that much is covered under the umbrella term of 'Language writing' and my discussion strives to present these complex and intricate interweavings of ethics and aesthetics as concisely as possible. Without an understanding of Language poetry it is impossible to perceive what Minter is doing in his "Empty Texas" series.

### Theoretical

Emerging in the theory days of the eighties, Language poets are heavily influenced by philosophies and theories of language and culture. This includes the theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, Roman Jakobson, Ferdinand de Saussure (structuralism), Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel de Certeau, Jean-Jacques Lecerle, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and many others. This theoretical basis is most obvious in the many essays that expound their poetics, but Language poets refute the idea that theory and poetry are separate forms, as Charles Bernstein states "[t]heory is never more than the extension of practice" ("Interview, Conducted by Tom Beckett" 35).

Bernstein states that he writes "against Derrida", and with Wittgenstein and Deleuze and Guattari, to emphasise that it is the *use* of language that is important in Language writing:

> The distortion is to imagine that knowledge has an 'object; outside of the language of which it is a part – that words refer to 'transcendental signifieds' rather than being part of a language which itself produces meaning in terms of its grammar, its conventions, its 'agreements in judgment' . . . Wittgenstein's relation of grammar to 'forms of life' emphasizes that 'human convention is not arbitrary but constitutive of significant speech and activity . . . [that] mutual understanding, and hence language,

depends on nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life, call it our mutual attunement or agreement in our criteria.' . . .

That words have meaning not by virtue of universals, of underlying structures or rules, but in *use,* in – to use the expression from *Anti-Oedipus – desiring production.* ('. . . desire produces reality, or stated another way, desiring production is one and the same as social production.') ("The Objects of Meaning"60).

At the centre of this theoretical basis is a rejection of the prevailing model of communication, the "conduit theory of communication (me→you)" (Introduction to "Language Sampler"). The "trouble" with this model is that it is claimed to be a "two-way wire with the message shuttling back and forth in blissful ignorance of the (its) transom (read: ideology)" (75) and "it presupposes individuals to exist as separate entities outside language and to be communicated *at* by language" (78). In response to this understanding of language and communication, Language poets' poststructuralist poetics calls for an acknowledgement of the way language constructs and positions reality and subjectivity.

Perloff states that the poetics of Language writing "must be understood as part of the larger post-structuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject" ("Language Poetry and The Lyric Subject" 1). In particular, the theories of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are relevant to Language writings' critique of subjectivity, the lyric 'I' of poetry and the role of the reader. In "The Death of the Author" (1968) Barthes maintained that

writing, far from being the simple and direct expression of interiority, is 'the destruction of every voice, every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where one subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.' 'Linguistically,' Barthes declared, 'the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person'.'

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the measure of the Author-God)….The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others….Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from

which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (Perloff 1-2)

Perloff quotes Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969) to demonstate the close connection between the poetics of Language poetry and poststructuralist thought:

Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. Thus, the essential basis of this writing is not exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears.

The author is now replaced by the 'author function' – the function of a particular discourse – and the pressing questions about a given text become, not 'What has [the author] revealed of his most profound self in his language?', but 'Where does [this discourse] come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?' (Perloff 2)

Equally influential to the poetics of Language writing is Jameson's "historicized" version of the theories of Barthes and Foucault "along Marxist and, specifically Althusserian lines" in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Perloff 2). Foucault's pronouncement that the "'writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of 'expression'" becomes Jameson's complaint against postmodernism and his famous claim that postmodernism is marked by the

'waning of affect' that manifests itself in an ability to produce satire or even parody, the latter giving way to 'blank parody' or pastiche. 'As for expression,' writes Jameson, '…the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older <u>anomie</u> of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.'" (Perloff 3)

Perloff points out that the poststructural and postmodern theories of the 'death of the subject' are evident in the poetics of Language poets as revealed in their 'group manifesto', "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto" written collaboratively by Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steven Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Warren

(1988): "'our work denies the centrality of the individual artist . . . The self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing'" (Perloff 3).

Despite these claims of the importance of theoretical influences, in their introduction to the anthology *Imagining Language* Language poets Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery suggest that their "attraction to critical theory in the 1970s was motivated by our own poetic practice" and in particular by those "*peripheral*" and uncanonised works of various writers:

> In the academic sphere, theory has often been a paranoiac waxworks; but for us, the 'floating signifier,' 'intertexuality,' 'the pleasure of the text' and 'the death of the subject' seemed uncannily congruent with a heterogeneity of creative stimuli attracting us like a gravitational field – from pataphysics and Dada to sound poetry and the discussion initiated in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, to which we both contributed. The doctrinal alliances, declarations, and prohibitions now associated with institutionalized theory are beside the point, when those theories are traced to the little-known antecedents anthologized here. For instance, Roland Barthes's passionate absorption in André Masson's calligrams cannot be reduced to the 'poststructuralist' interpretation of a 'Surrealist' painter – particularly when Barthes's supposedly denominational sympathies are revealed to share much with the eighteenth-century Welshman Rowland Jones, the 'alphabet of desire' of English magus Austin Osman Spare, and the Baroque combinatorials of Juan Caramuel de Lobkowitz. Likewise, the diacritical modulations of William Bullokar and Claudius Holybrand presage by three centures the Derridean practice of sous rature or the putting under erasure of a dysfunctional concept. (xii)

This remarkable anthology presents "*the literary phenomenon of the exception, the special case*": those works that do not fit into the "*canonical spectrum*" of the "*regulated normality of literature*" but reveal "*another, submerged order*" (x). Within this massive anthology (618 pages) are the poetic influences of Language writing, a type of genealogy which documents an "expanded field of practices and theories spanning back across three millennia" (x).

### Ethics

Andrews and Bernstein's introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* emphasises the ethical or political motivations of the poetics of Language writing:

> This is inevitably a social and political activity as well as an aesthetic one. One major preoccupation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E has therefore been to generate discussion on the relation of writing to politics, particularly to articulate some of the ways that writing can act to critique society.

In the 'Manifesto' a clear alignment is made with the politics of the left which was at the time involved in the protests against the Vietnam war, and fighting for the civil rights of women and blacks. Living in the post-McCarthy days and the "phenomenon of the Reagan years", as Lyn Hejinian describes it (*Salt* interview with Alison Georgeson 257), Language poets rebelled against the limitations imposed by the new right which they believed were evident in society and poetry. The 'Manifesto' cites an example of the early reception of Language poetries as evidence of the "hysteric and phobic reactions" of the new right and its political rhetoric of control:

> There's been a minor revival of the 'spectre of Communism' in red-baiting articles such as one last year in *The New Criterion* in which the use of the word *Stalin* in one of our poems sufficed to uncover an apparent nest of literary Reds in San Francisco and thus to raise a flag to the New Right . . . the stakes here are more consequential, as anyone aware of the use of such political rhetoric since McCarthy knows: if would-be rock-lyric censor Paula Hawkins had not been defeated for senator in Florida, eventually contemporary poetry may have mattered even to her. These reactions of the new right attest to a hysteria that is part of the dominant literary code; in a larger sense, a delimitation of the aesthetically possible that has political implications – in the exclusion of difference from normative forms of communication and action. (262-263)

The connection between aesthetics and ethics is presented thus: aesthetic narrowness or exclusion equals the unethical position that excludes 'others' on the narrow grounds of difference. The "exclusion of difference" operating in the world of poetry represents the exclusion of difference that controls society.


### Subjectivity and the Lyric 'I'

The poetics of Language writing is built upon a critique of this exclusion of difference by rejecting what they define as "Official Verse Culture" and its perpetuation of the 'natural'

look poetry which 'expresses' the 'inner feelings' and 'experiences' of the 'authentic' and 'autonomous' self (Bernstien, *Content's Dream* 41). This critique is postmodern in orientation: it involves a rejection of the centered though alienated Modern subject and replaces it with a thoroughly fragmented and multiple sense of subjectivity. Language poets' postmodern poetics recognises the end of an individual, authentic and autonomous sense of subjectivity and acknowledges subjectivity as a process constructed by language, culture, society and relationships of all types. There is no room for an autonomous sense of subjectivity in a global world characterised by the breakdown of borders and divides, where electronic communication enables prolific dialogue across countries on a daily basis, where previously unheard or denied voices are being heard, and different cultures clash, collide and connect. 'Being' has been replaced by *becoming* and what subjects become is multiple.

In poetry, postmodern concepts of the subject call into question the way subjectivity is presented in a poem and in particular the conventional ways the lyric 'I' functions. The poetics of Language poetry is based upon a critique of concepts of subjectivity that are no longer appropriate to late twentieth century society. As Perloff states:

> One of the cardinal principles – perhaps the cardinal principle – of American Language poetics . . . has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry. In the preface ('Language, Realism, Poetry') to his anthology *In The American Tree,* Ron Silliman famously declared that Robert Grenier's 'I HATE SPEECH' manifesto, published in the first issue of the San Francisco journal *This* (1971), 'announced a breach – and a new moment in American writing' – a rejection of 'simple ego psychology in which the poetic text represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object. And the reader likewise.' ("Language Poetry and The Lyric Subject" 1)

Following Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky, Language poets question the "norms of persona-centered, 'expressive' poetry":

> The narrowness and provincialism of mainstream literary norms have been maintained over the last twenty years in a stultifying steady state in which the

personal, 'expressive' lyric has been held up as the canonical poetic form . . . The elevation of the lyric of fetishized personal 'experience' into a canon of taste has been ubiquitous and unquestioned. ("The Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto" 261-262)

The concept of subjectivity challenged by Language poetry

> encompasses many things, but among these is a narrative persona, the fictive person (even in biography) who speaks in his or her poem about experience raised to a suitably aestheticized surface. This kind of self is readily recognizable in countless examples that bubble up from creative writing workshops – brief narratives with moralizing codas in short poems of medium-length lines, sometimes in regular stanzaic patterns but often in free verse without rhyme, the canonical mode of poetry today.  Moreover, it is not just any experience but a certain *kind* of experience that is valorized as appropriate to the 'workshop effect.' (263)

Poetry that maintains this sense of "isolated individualism" does so by presenting an

"ideology of no ideology, a plausible denial of intention in their work" in which

> Experience is digested for its moral content and then dramatized and framed; at the same time, the transcendent moment dissolves back into the sentimental and banal, maintaining the purity of the poem by excluding explicit agendas . . .

> Here a particular kind of self is used as the vehicle for an aesthetic project in which the specifics of experience dissolve into the pseudo-intimacy of an overarching authorial 'voice.' (264)

This use of the lyric 'I' is "related to early examples of the confessional voice poem, for

which William Stafford's famous line 'I thought hard for us all' might stand as a prime

example. In these versions, authorial 'voice' lapses into melodrama in a social allegory where

the author is precluded from effective action by his or her very emotions" (265).  The

manifesto quotes Rae Amantrout's review of *Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* to

further explain the way this type of subjectivity is perpetuated in 'Official Verse Culture':

> a narrative, discursive approach which places the writer physically in some particular setting, often though not always, rustic, and begins to relate one (complexity is not favored) particular experience . . . Thus we see that the 'typical younger American poet' is outdoors in an 'abandoned' location, doing physical labor with a sharp implement. Both isolation and sharp implements seem associated in the 'typical' American mind with a certain glamour. Perhaps that is what lends these poems their tones of authority and solemnity . . . For me there is an oppressive machismo inherent in all this. (qtd. in Silliman et al. 264)

The "oppressive machismo" of the 'Official Verse Culture' maintains a sense of subjectivity that relies upon a "heroic and transcendent project" which is "irrelevant" to contemporary society and can only be sustained by ignoring the "developments and insights accessible in other arts over the last seventy-five years" (264).

In response to postmodern concepts of subjectivity, Language poets dissociate the "I that thinks" and the "I that is the object of thought" (this dissociation is attributed to Coleridge). This dissociation involves a "refusal to identify the *I* as agent with the horizon of the 'I,' and thus with easily perceived moral categories" (266). The connection of the two relies upon a "habit" of thought which can only exist without thought (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*). Coleridge's distinction between these two concepts of the self or the 'I' of poetry "opposes itself to the elision of consciousness that occurs in habitual constructions of belief" which involves an "understanding of the self as a critically necessary project". From this project of the self as the "object of thought", Language poets propose the "dissociated self as critique" which will "recharge this neurological scar tissue" (which is the result of habitual thought) (266). This involves the dissociation between the 'I' of the poem and the 'I' who writes the poem, and the corresponding "ambiguous use of the word *I*", which in turn leads to the question of how language functions:

> The question of reference is opened by the critique of the self to processes where the self is simply not the final term.
> An openness of self in the present finds language not as simply transparent and instrumental but as a necessity of the world at large – an obstacle as well as an advantage. (266)

The project of the "dissociated self as a critique" leads Language poets to questions of language itself and in particular the type of language used to perpetuate the subject of 'Official Verse Culture'.

The language of "speech" is the 'natural' language of the sense of subjectivity perpetuated by

'Official Verse Culture':

> Just as it's been useful to consider what the *I* means in contemporary 'expressivist' poetry, it is likewise instructive to examine its version of speech. In such work, a compacted persona speaks a kind of metaphorized testimonial to the validity of one's life and moral choices. It is as if a distant judge were being appealed to in modest tones intended to argue one's case in a voice just loud enough to be overheard. Propriety is the rule. (266-267)

The postmodern concept of language as constructive denies the 'truth' of any claim to

'natural' speech-orientated language.  Language poets emphasise that "[s]peech values in

poetry are quite far from 'real' speech"; except for the "transcriptions of Jack Kerouac's

*Visions of Cody* or Ed Friedman's *The Telephone Book*", the language of poetry is "greatly

stylized" (even William Carlos Williams who was interested in "American speech patterns"

wrote in a stylised language, 267).


Charles Bernstein in "Stray Straws and Straw Men" critiques the 'natural look' poetry and its

"sanctification" of "its honesty, its directness, its authenticity, its artlessness, its sincerity, its

spontaneity, its personal expressiveness":

> 1. 'I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within. The theory of fragments whereby poetry becomes a grab bag of favorite items – packed neatly together with the glue of self-conscious & self-consciously epic composition, or, lately, homogenized into one blend by the machine of programmatic form – is a diversion. The eye is not split open in such work. There are structures – edifices – wilder than the charts of rivers, but they are etched by marking a path not designing a garden.'
> 　　'Natural: the very word should be struck from the language.'
> 　　'…but what the devil *is* the human?'
> (originally published in 1977 in *Open Letter* 3:2  "The Politics of the Referent" symposium, here from *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* 39)

The "eye" that sees clearly and the 'I' that speaks clearly without falter (a modernist sense of

subjectivity), needs to be "split open" to become multiple, fragmented, shattered – to

become the postmodern subject that falls into the "edifices" or cracks of the multiple self, and disappears and reappears and disappears again to emerge in another guise, as an 'other' seeing/speaking 'I'. Bernstein's use of the word "edifices" signifies both the splits in the subject and the paths the subject etches. Unlike the 'natural' and 'gentle' designer of pretty gardens, Bernstein's etching subject works wildly by cutting and corroding. Neither of these subjects is 'natural' nor is one approach more 'natural' than the other. However, one presents itself as 'natural': "Personal subject matter & a flowing syntax . . . are the key to the natural look" (40).

> What I want to call attention to is that there is no natural writing style; that the preference for its supposed manifestations is simply a preference for a particular look to poetry & often a particular vocabulary (usually perceived as personal themes); that this preference (essentially a procedural decision to work within a certain domain sanctified into a rite of poetry) actually obscures the understanding of the work which appears to be its honoured bases; & especially that the cant of 'make it personal' & 'let it flow' are avoidances – by mystification – of some very compelling problems that swirl around truthtelling, confession, bad faith, false self, authenticity, virtue, etc. (42)

The "natural, or the organic, or the personal" presented in the "claim to natural spontaneous writing – the impulse to record to transcribe the movements & make-up of one's consciousness" is a "modernist" phenomena that relies upon a belief that one's consciousness can be ordered into language "as if consciousness existed prior to – aside from – language & had to be 'put into' it" (42-43). Consciousness is not free of language, it is "itself a syntacticalization – a syntaxophony" (43). Given the conditions of postmodernity, a "syntactical exploration of consciousness becomes very explicitly the concern" (43) for "there are no thoughts except through language, we are everywhere seeing through it, limited to it but not by it" (44).

Language poets' postmodern ethics involves a "tearing off of the mask of illusions" (Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* 3) that sustain and perpetuate a sense of the self as the "central and final term of creative practice" ("The Politics of Poetry" 263). They 'challenge' and 'explode' this practice "in a number of ways" ("The Politics of Poetry" 263). One of these ways is to deny the "centrality of the individual artist" by writing "without a stable authorial center or perceptible narrative 'voice'" (263). This is evident in the Language poetry of Clark Coolidge which, as Perloff's reading states, has "no identifiable, coherent 'I,' a Man Speaking to Men, whose ruminations culminate in a moment of insight" (*Poetic License* 65-66). Perloff's reading contrasts Coolidge's poetry with that of the 'Official Verse Culture' of Lowell and Strand:

> Lowell's and Strand's representations of Romantic selfhood – of the sensitive and delicate response on the part of a definable 'I' to the vagaries of experience – their verbal echoes of great Anglo-American poets from Wordsworth to Yeats to Stevens . . .
> Such poetry is, in fact, highly formulaic: note the 'I-as-sensitive-register,' the 'direct' colloquial diction that nevertheless moves readily and inevitably in and out of metaphor, the enjambed free-verse line, the 'flat' description that yields immanent meaning, and, most important, the Romantic faith in the power of ordinary, everyday experiences to yield 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.' (*Poetic License* 63)

In contrast, "the norm of natural speech" in Coolidge is replaced with "'writerly' meditations, whose verbal artifice . . . points to the inevitable disjunction between words and things, the slippage between sounds and the meanings they carry" (66).


Another approach is provided by Perloff's reading of Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* in which she suggests that different subjects cannot be distinguished: Howe "meditates so intensely on the work" of Dickinson that the "two voices imperceptibly merge" (*Poetic License* 36). And of Howe's work generally, Perloff states that "there is not . . . so much as a trace in Howe's work of the 'I-centered' mode . . . Except for "Buffalo. 12.7.41" in *Pythagorean Silence*

(and this only in part), I know of no Howe poem that is directly autobiographical or personal" (*Poetic License* 299). This is Howe's intention for her "subject, broadly speaking, is the impingement of historical or biographical narrative on lyric consciousness" (36). Perloff's reading of Hejininan's *My Life* provides another "strategy" which works "to create a language field that could be anybody's autobiography":

> When a personal memory is presented – for example, 'I was afraid of my uncle with the wart on his nose' – it is a total commonplace. *My Life,* it seems, is not "mine" at all; the emphasis, in any case, is on writing itself, on the 'life' lived by words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, endowed with the possibility of entering upon new relationships. ("The Word as Such" 17)

Language poets' critique of the "Romantic conception of the lyric as 'an intensely subjective and personal expression' (Hegel), the 'utterance that is not so much heard as overheard' (John Stuart Mill)" (Perloff, *Poetic License* 14), is evident in the contraction, if not erasure, of a poet's personal subject. Charles Bernstein's reading of Robin Blaser's poetry suggests that citations are another way of presenting the multiplicity of subjectivity:

> The pervasiveness of citations and found language in Blaser's poetry and essays compromises (and at the same time comprises) his authorial identity; to read him is to be thrown into the company of his textual companions, so that his own voice is overshadowed by other voices, through whom he speaks (*My Way* 172)

In a statement about her poetics, Language poet Rosmarie Waldrop suggests that erasure of subjectivity is desirable though perhaps not possible:

> Who speaks when a poem says "I"? I hold with Keats: "the chameleon poet . . . has no self." None. Or a multitude. Not just Goethe's "two souls alas," but whole bundle of them, activated as the situation demands.
>  As Musil knew, "identity," "character," "qualities" are what is most *im*personal, is what is reinforced *from the outside.* <u>If I cannot erase them I can at least try to take my distance.</u>
>  "Identity" for the poet: baleful, restrictive, rather than allowing the full play of potentiality. (underline added, "Rosmarie Waldrop" 267)

As McCaffery states in "The Death of the Subject", the poetics of Language poetry is driven by the desire "to show the essential subjectless-ness" of a poem (61), but as Waldrop

acknowledges it is difficult or impossible to achieve the erasure of subjectivity. Waldrop's

strategy is to create distance between the 'I' of the poem and the 'I' who writes, thus creating

complicated concepts of subjectivity. Language poetry is not devoid of subjects, but how

those subjects (or the various lyric 'I's of a poem) relate to the poet writing is deliberately

complex and ambiguous.


### Relationship Between Capitalism and Language

The other "cardinal principle" of the poetics of Language poetry is a critique of the

relationship between capitalism and language, and Ron Silliman's essay "Disappearance of

the Word, Appearance of the World" is one of the most influential and thoroughly engaged

with this topic. (This essay was originally published in 1977 and it was published without

revision for *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* in 1984, from which I quote.) The

importance of Silliman's essay and its relevance to Language poets is demonstrated by

Andrews and Bernstein's discussion in the introduction to *The L=A=N=U=A=G=E Book*

(a paragraph in a two page introduction):

> [the essay] applies the notion of commodity fetishism to conventional descriptive
> and narrative forms of writing – where the word – words – cease to be valued for
> what they are themselves but only for their properties as instrumentalities leading us
> to a world outside or beyond them, so that words – language – disappear, become
> transparent, leaving the picture of a physical world the reader can consume as if it
> were a commodity. This view of the role and historical functions of literature relates
> closely to our analysis of the capitalist social order as a whole and of the place that
> alternative forms of writing and reading might occupy in its transformation. It is our
> sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity
> for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention
> to, and active participation in, its production. (x)

Silliman poses the question, "Does capitalism have a specific 'reality' which is passed

through the language and thereby imposed on its speakers?" and replies "affirmatively"

(123).  Capitalism is responsible for transforming language from a discourse formed by gestures and objects, into a descriptive (prescriptive) force of capitalism.

> What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of 'realism,' the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the nature of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed (deformed) into referentiality.
>
> In its primary form, reference takes the character of a gesture and an object, such as the picking up of a stone to be used as a tool. Both gesture and object carry their own integrities and are not confused: a sequence of gestures is distinct from the objects which may be involved, as distinct as the labor process is from its resultant commodities. A sequence of gestures forms a discourse, not a description. It is precisely the expressive integrity of the gestural nature of language which constitutes the meaning of the 'nonsense' syllables in tribal poetries; its persistence in such characteristics of Skelton's poetry as his rhyme is that of a trace. (125)

Perhaps because of the complexity of the topic (and hence the difficulty of this essay), Silliman wrote another version which clarifies some of the more intricate details.  (This appears as an essay-letter entitled, "from aRb", which is addressed to Steve [McCaffery] and is part of a special Language poetry section in *Open Letter* edited by McCaffery, 1977.)  To clarify his comments about tribal poetry, Silliman states:

> At an early historical stage, poems were the shared language events of small tribal groups. The value of the poem was one of exchange and use. It was the product and common property of the tribe and not the individual. The language of the poem was physical and alive to its speakers. It had its own integrity and recognized the separate integrity of the world. It was empowered to discuss the world but did not presume to describe it. It was the gesture and not the object. The joy in language was that which any man or woman feels in any act of creative labour. One sees evidence of this reality everywhere in the tribal poetries of the world, much of which has been made commonly available by the work of Jerry Rothenberg. One even sees its traces in early English literature. Rhyme is an ordering of language by its physical elements. The physicality of language as a determining element commonly recognized by all speakers is a precondition of any such ordering. (89)

Silliman explains the problems inherent when language becomes narrowly descriptive:

> At a certain post-tribal stage of development, the world of natural objects was replaced by a world of things. The defining characteristic of a thing is its double-projection: it is both the end result of a labour process (a product) and an object for

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general social consumption (a commodity). A thing is a schizoid object. A world of such things is madness. The resolution of this dual projection can only occur when the productive forces control the means of production and consumption: in short, communism.

If such a resolution does not (as has been the case everywhere in the world) occur, then a struggle arises between the opposing projections. When one set of forces is dominant, the other is repressed. This has taken place not simply in the market-place, but in every aspect of society and humanity. It has determined consciousness.

The repression of the product* (labour) nature of things is called the commodity fetish. In language it is a fetish of description, of reference and has a second higher-order fetish of narration . . . It is the object without gesture. The object appears now to move of its own free will. (*product is further clarified in the notes by quoting from the original essay and specifically relating it to Lacanian concepts of the "overdetermined" object). (90)

Poetry becomes commoditised for various reasons: the production of the book of poems in 1557 "made the commoditization of the poem much easier" because the "poet no longer could see his audience", he had become an "author" (and had "undergone a division of labour") rather than a "member of a small tribal group" (90). The technology of the printing press altered the way poems were visually presented and the way they reached their audience (90). With the novel and the professionalisation of literary criticism the "ultimate act of the commoditized poem" occurs and the "now passive reader (this too a division of labour) stares at a 'blank' page while a story appears to unfold miraculously in front of his or her eyes" (91). Silliman perceives this as a historical division and the "continuous struggle between the forces of commodity language (the capitalists) and those of product language (the working class)" (91).

Silliman concludes with the ways Language writing rebels against the commoditisation of language:

It is first of all conscious of itself. Its attempt is the spelling out of all the deformations of language which result from the repressing mechanism of the commodity fetish. It discusses the world and does not describe it. It does not impose 'reality' on the reader by fiat. It calls attention to the words it is using. It shows that

the great rush of energy one gets in any good poem is nothing other than dialectical consciousness itself. It is not the 'end of the novel' nor of literary criticism, but is their return to the poem itself.

It is the first step (and only that) of the return of the poem to the people. It is a politicized poem and not a 'political poem' (which is a counter-tendency occurring within the commodity fetish). It tells you that these words are empty until you fill them with your presence, reading them, being them. Together, you and these words can do anything.

The essay, "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World", similarly concludes that poetry needs to recognise "itself as the *philosophy of practice in language*" and needs to place the "issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program" (131). Language poets unequivocally embrace both of these practices.

Bruce Andrews in "Writing Social Work & Political Practice" expands on the habitual function of language in a capitalist economy:

One mode of writing tips its hat to assumptions of reference, representation, transparency, clarity, description, reproduction, positivism. Words are mere windows, substitutes, proper names, haloed or subjugated by the things to which they seem to point. 'Communication' resembles an exchange of prepackaged commodities. Here, active signifying is subordinated, transitive. Its continuing *constitution* of the world is ignored. So are the materiality of words & the conventions by which they get generated. Words are mistaken for tools (if only they could disappear to make way for meanings that sit outside language). Our concepts or mental pictures are confused with referents & referents are attributed a secure identity that precedes their delivery into thought & words (the conventional nature of that relation is also ignored). An illusion, the taken-for-granted, *the fetish*. (133-134)

The "structuralist view" posits that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary: "Word matter is not dissolved by reference but exists relationally within an overall sign system. Signification occurs negatively, through *difference* & opposition – terms signify by being differentiated from all other terms, not intrinsically or transparently" (134). However, the problem of the capitalist use of language is the negation of these differences:

The Blob-like social force of interchangeability & *equivalence* (unleashed by the capitalist machine, and so necessary to the commodification of language) precedes us: it has actually carried quite far the erosion of the system of differences on which

signification depends. It's reached the point where a coercive organization of grammar, rhetoric, technical format & ideological symbols is normally imposed in everyday life to even get these eroded differences to do their job any more (an assembly line to deliver meaning, of certain kinds). (135)

However, the problem with the commodification of language is not that language has become *essentially referential,* for "[w]riting is actually constitutive of these underlying libidinal flows; it is the desire for meaning, if not message" and "[m]eaning isn't just a surplus value to be eliminated"; the problem with the commodification of language is the type of meaning-making processes that a referential use of language relies upon. Meaning "comes out of a productive *practice"*; it is not a 'passive' process but an "active" process of "back & forth: a relay constantly making contexts out of a fabric of markings: writing & reading" (135). The commodification of language depends upon passive reading processes, reading processes that are habitual and without thought. The ideologies transferred by this type of language go undetected – they present themselves as non-existent. By critiquing the referential qualities of language, by writing poetry that is, if not non-referential, "post-referential" (Silliman "from aRb"), Language poets place "the repressed element" of language at the "center of the program".

In his editorial preface to the special Language poetry section of *Open Letter,* "The Politics of the Referent", McCaffery discusses the importance of Silliman's essay and the connection between capitalism and language:

> A firm conviction shared by these writers is the intimate interrelation and interdependence of linguistic structure with capitalistic structure. Language is a huge support system for a particular method of production and distribution that reaches personification in the form of bureaucracy. To change the structure of the language is, in large part, to change the nature of the superstructure. I believe that we owe to Ron Silliman the radical insight into the political ramifications of reference: that what Marx exposed as the fetishism of commodity is the same mode of mystification that is enacted in the fetishism of the referent, both being instruments for the displacement of human relations into an iconography of commodity. (60)

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In his equally influential essay, "The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing" (also in this issue of *Open Letter*), McCaffery heeds Silliman's connection between capitalism and language and critiques the use of language as a transparent window to the world: "REFERENCE I take it, is that kind of blindness a window makes of the pane it is; that motoric thrust of the word which takes you out of language into a tenuous world of the other and so prevents you seeing what it is you see" (61).  Rejecting the referential quality of language brings one back to language and

> involves a major alteration in textual roles: of the socially defined functions of writer and readers as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis. The main thrust of this work is hence political, rather than aesthetic, towards a frontal assault of the steady categories of authorship and readership. What it offers is the alternative sense of reader and writer as equal and simultaneous participants within a language product. At its core, linguistic reference is a displacement of human relationships and as such is fetishistic in the Marxian sense. Reference, like commodity, has no connection with the physical property and material relations of the word as a grapheme. (62)

By placing language at the centre of their project Language writers imagine more democratic reading processes where readers become writers, and become "equal" with the poet. Rejecting or calling into question the referential component of language seeks to change human relations: rather than displaced, relations are equalised.  Free of the constraints (both blinding and numbing) of referentiality, language becomes an "emptied sign" which is open to the multiple ways a reader wishes to 'fill it' or interpret it (64).  Emptied of referentiality language is "removed from function" and opened to the multiple functions a reader chooses (64).

> The initial problem in readership here is to abandon all prejudical perceptual sets and to consciously assist oneself in producing one's own reading among the polysemous routes that the text offers.  With the removal of grammatical conditioners as dictates of a single reading, language enters the domain of its own inwardness: the conventional centrifugality of signification is reversed and the Sign turns inward through the absence of grammar to a pure, lexemic presence. (63)

McCaffery argues that Language writing deconstructs language so that it can be "observed and experienced as event per se" (64):

> Cipherality belongs to a synchronic poetics; it is tenseless and free from both reference and alterity, thereby centered within its textual self and available as a primary empirical experience. The cipheral text involves a replacement in readerly function from a reading of words to an experiencing of graphemes, for conventional reading involves the use of referential vectors and it is such vectors that are here removed. Language is material and primary and what's experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and lettristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become, significations. (63-64)

Quoting from a poem by Bruce Andrews

> mob cuspid
> welch
>     eyelet
> go lavender
> futuribles

McCaffery asks the reader:

> do you decipher or do you augment and complete? Both approaches are admissible, for it's precisely the nature of the texts likes andrews' to present themselves as ambiguities, approachable either as densities, as compressions requiring a reading that approximates a hermeneusis; or else as lacunaire, deliberate incompletions requesting a reading that extends them towards completion. (64)

To demonstrate the possibility of various approaches to reading Language poetry, McCaffery discusses each of the above without favour for one 'right' way (64-65). This poetic practice connects aesthetics and ethics because, according to a "Marxian perceptual set, the cipher is a strategic method of creating non-commodital process-products, a method of ontological deconstruction that casts reader and writer both into the one, same labour process" (67). That is, as creators of meanings readers become writers; readers are freed from commodified language, the easy consumption of language and freed from being consumed by it. The poem "becomes the communal space of a labour, initiated by the writer and extended by the second writer (the reader)" (67).

McCaffery discusses various poetic techniques of Language writing, but the main thrust is towards an 'open' poem which creates 'writerly' reading processes. Here Roland Barthes' theories of the readerly and writerly text are relevant:

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing . . . In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled,* nothing *deciphered* . . . the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. ("Death of the Author" 117-118)

In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes refers to a closed text as a readerly text: it stabilises and meets readers' expectations. In contrast is the open text which is defined as a writerly text that discomforts as it challenges the reader to actively produce the text. Language poets intend to write writerly poetry which enables the reader to be actively productive.

Lyn Hejinian's famous essay "The Rejection of Closure" (1983) elaborates on the way Language poets use this idea of the closed versus the opened text and how it works in their conceptions of democratic reading processes. Hejinian defines a closed text as "one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity" (270). The "virtues" of the closed text are its "immense emotional power" as in the case of detective novels and Charles Dickens' novels (271-272). All the narrative devices "are pointed in one direction [and] the reader simply cannot remain impervious to all that harmony" (272). A closed text satisfies the reader in various ways, it satisfies "our nostalgia, our yearning to review what we already know or have so often seen" and in this sense the closed text is "socializing" (272). In contrast, the open text

> is open to the world and particularly the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. Reader and writer engage in a collaboration from which ideas

and meanings are permitted to evolve. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The open text often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material, turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification (272).

Poststructural theories, like those of Roland Barthes in "From Work to Text", make a similar distinction between "consuming" a closed text and the creative readerly pleasures of "playing" which are enabled by the open text (170-171).

These writerly-reading processes involve a shift in reading practices and require a different form of criticism. As an example of how *not* to read or write criticism on Language poetry, Perloff quotes from Rod Mengham's reading of Charles Bernstein's "Fear of Flipping":

> [This poem] seeks refuge in the unsuspected, in a trial of wits with the reader for whom experience of reading a poem is usually a preparation to *solve its difficulties,* to *formulate its meaning* and thus to *translate it into other words.* Clearly, this poem will not submit to any design except the need to delay that second stage of reading, the *reduction to sense,* and it derives nearly all its vitality from the need for evasive action . . . "Fear of Flipping". . . is so monotonous in register and has such a limited range of rhythms that the reader is only very faintly *instructed in the composition of ideas.* (Perloff's emphasis, *Radical Artifice* 171)

This "New Critical" approach of seeking to 'solve difficulties', 'formulate meaning', 'translate into other words', 'reduce to sense' and be 'instructed in the composition of ideas' is not appropriate for Language poetry (171). Perloff points out that Mengham's reading of Bernstein's poetry is not an "isolated case; on the contrary, most critiques of Bernstein's work, as of Language poetry in general, have raised the issue of the work's nonreferentiality" and have dismissed the poetry on the grounds that "it gets nowhere" (Albert Gelpi), does not communicate (Robert von Hallberg), and is "seriously limiting" (Charles Altieri) (Perloff, 172-173). Perloff's reading of Bernstein's "Safe Methods of Business" (1987) debunks these claims (I quote at length to present the full reading):

> The Sleepy impertinence of winsome actuarials
> Lambs me to accrue mixed beltings – or,
> Surreptitiously apodictic, impedes erstwhile,
> Pumice, for instance, has bowdlerized the steam
> As amulets of oddments cedar coatfins
> Or rake about shoals. (*S* 134)

Bernstein's oxymorons – 'sleepy impertinence,' 'winsome actuarials,' 'surreptitiously apodictic' – are even less accessible than Ashbery's "business personals,' relying as they do, on words from specialized discourses like insurance ('actuarial'), or philosophy ('apodictic'), or on what are now almost archaisms like 'winsome,' an adjective that brings to mind Victorian novels and old songbooks. In line 2, the construction 'lambs me' converts an ordinary noun into a very unusual verb form ('lamb' = 'to bear or bring forth, to 'drop' a lamb' [*OED*], but also, in Australian usage, 'lamb down' = 'to induce [a person] to get rid of his money,' to fleece), the pun on 'lam' creating further complications. In line 3, 'erstwhile' (adjective or adverb) is used oddly as the noun object of the verb 'impedes'; in line 4 'bowdlerized,' as verb applicable only to something written, is here applied to 'steam'; and in line 5 'amulets of oddments' are said to 'cedar' (can that be a verb?) 'coatfins' – a coinage perhaps on the analogy of 'coat-feathers' (the 'small or body feathers').

In all these instances, signification is obscure but by no means impossible. (185)

Here the verse form is itself parodic, a pop version of Jacobean blank verse. For although the syllable count per line is highly variable (15, 9, 13), the five-stresses-per-line rule is observed, and the heavy alliteration (e.g., 'surre*pti*tiously a*po*dic*t*ic, im*p*edes') and predominance of polysyllables creates a tightly woven, highly formalized structure. The elaborately phrased oxymorons contribute to the same parodic effect. One doesn't usually think of 'impertinence' as being 'sleepy' or of 'actuarials' (the reference is to the statistical tables used by insurance agents to calculate premiums, interest rates, life expectancies, and so on) as 'winsome,' but the language is, in fact, oddly exact: 'safe methods of business' are those based on 'winsome' (i.e., attractive, appealing) financial tables and yet the intrusions of these tables into our daily lives occurs with 'sleepy' (e.g., quiet, low-key, turned off) 'impertinence,' 'lambing' (fleecing? goading?) us to 'accrue' (the word goes nicely with 'actuarials') the 'mixed beltings' ('trading as mixed,' as they say on the 'Wall Street Report') of stock-market transactions. The phrase 'surreptitiously apodictic' in line 3 carries on the paradox of the opening line: 'apodictic' means 'Of clear demonstration; established on incontrovertible evidence'; and one of the examples the *OED* cites comes from Coleridge's *Statesman's Manual* (1816): 'In the heights of geometry . . . there exist truths of apodictic force in reason, which the mere understanding strives in vain to comprehend.' But the 'apodictic' knowledge to be gained from 'winsome actuarials' is 'surreptitiously' so, which is to say that those of us who are not actuaries have to take the statistics in question on faith. No wonder, then, that it 'impedes erstwhile.' (189-190)

Perloff demonstrates that meaning is made from Language poetry not by seeking a "specific, quantifiable message that a sender transmits", but by attending to "issues of connotation, nuance, context, and the like – indeed, all the factors that determine to what a given word or phrase is taken to refer" (186-187).  She makes sense of a poem that seems to be non-sense by attending to the various meanings of words like 'lamb', unusual meanings of words like 'sleepy' and 'lambing', and precise meanings of words like 'apodictic'.  In our information-over loaded society, reading poetry and writing poetry criticism is not about seeking information but engaging with the multiple meanings words and combinations of words can have.

Attending to the multiplicity of a word – its connotations and nuances in various contexts – is a common practice in Language poetry.  Demonstrative of this, or as Bernstein refers to it the "multivalent referential vectors that any word has" ("Thought's Measure"), are Perloff's comments about the phrase "waking at eight to an echo" in McCaffery's poem "Lag".  Perloff suggests that initially the phrase seems nonsensical: "One wakes at eight to an alarm or a phone call or a pat on the head or a kiss, but not an echo" (*Radical Artifice* 107).  However, meaning is possible "if one were asleep in, say a ravine" (107).  The multiple meanings of the word 'echo' also have a distinct late twentieth century significance: *Ecco* is a "brand name" (107), a coffee substitute and one may very well "wake at eight to" a cup of *Ecco*.  McCaffery's clever incorporation of a brand name emphasises the multivalent referential vectors of the word 'echo' and attends to the way language is used by advertising and the media in the late twentieth century.  The purpose of this, in the case of "Lag", is to "make strange" the "all-too-familiar": "Its strategy is to place the reader, along with the author, in the position that we are now actually in as we drive the freeways, shop on the mall,

push our carts through the supermarket, or watch the evening news" (109).  McCaffery's "Lag" alerts readers to the way language is used in "headlines, those cigarette adds, or road signs: the 'message' may not be what you think it is. Or, conversely, a seemingly obscure statement may be the bearer of a perfectly ordinary message" (108).  Language poetry works in the way of Wittgenstein-like 'language games' which emphasise that the "'aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is able to notice something because it is always before one's eyes)'" (Wittgenstein qtd. in Perloff 109).  The referential, transparent language of the media is an unnoticed language, but by drawing attention to language by semantically 'making it strange' McCaffery's "waking at eight to an echo" draws attention to the word itself.

The subversion of linear development or narrative progression via serial composition and "syntactic indeterminacy" is another important poetic practice (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 46). Linear development is replaced by connections (rather than information) and meaning-making is an accumulative process.  Lines are constructed in a "metonymic mode" which "expresses its structure as a set of tangencies" rather than metaphorically like the lyric which "equate[s] disparate materials" and "draw[s] them toward a central axis that expresses some unity of the whole" (Conte, *Unending Design* 23).  Whereas narrative development relies upon "linear and continuous" movement, the movement of Language poetry is "curvilinear and disjunctive" because it "generates a centrifugal force, which is always directed away from a central axis" (Conte 23).  This creates poetry that is frequently difficult because as Bernstein stresses it creates poetry that stimulates "a process of thinking rather than a report of things already settled; an investigation of figuration rather than a picture of something figured out" (Bernstein, *My Way* 117).

*The point is not to display imagination but to mobilize imaginations* (Berstein, *My Way* 136).

Language poets view their poetry as empowering creativity in the world and thus empowering their readers.


## Conjugations: Minter's Post-Language Poetics

In America post-Language poets include Lisa Jarnot, Jennifer Moxley, Dodie Bellamy, Mark Wallace, Susan Wheeler, Juliana Spahr, Susan Schultz (Hawaii), Karen Volkman and many others. In Australia we might include Peter Minter, Kate Fagan, Michael Brennan, Jane Gibian, Louis Armand (an Australian poet living in Prague), Geraldine McKenzie and others who are now beginning to emerge. Minter's "Empty Texas" series is of particular relevance to a discussion of post-Language poetics because it specifically engages with the poetics of Language poetry. The series includes nineteen poems which are published in Minter's second collection of the same name. In reply to my general questions about the relationship between the series and the poetics of Language poetry, and in particular the first poem in the series *"Linguige",* Minter comments:

> Linguige (underlined 'I's) is a personal joke of mine, (as many of these terms in the series are)
> cf L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E
> via their exploration of the L=I=N=G=U=I=S=T=I=C
> and the status of the 'I'
> becomes L=I=N=G=U=I=G=E
> underlined 'I' to not make it too obvious, forgetting the =, 'A' becomes 'I' (Zukofsky becoming postlanguage) as Artificial Intelligence in the poetry machine; and also making fun of the whole project, the 'erasure' of subjectivity, or anti-referentiality at least, is to me no longer interesting. (Email to Author, "Re: Linguige" 19 Nov. 1999)

Minter's post-Language poetics playfully critiques certain aspects of the poetics of Language poetry, like the desire to erase the poet's subjectivity or lyric 'I' from poetry and the attempts to write poetry that is non-referential. Simultaneously Minter's poetics incorporates the

postmodern poetics of Language writing in various ways. Like Language poetry Minter's "Empty Texas" series places language at the centre of its project, conceives language as constructive of reality and subjectivity, emphasises the 'word as such' by attending to the materiality and physicality of language, and meaning-making processes rely on the "multivalent referential vectors that any word has" (Bernstein, "Thought's Measure") rather than linear or narrative development. Certainly, all of these postmodern aspects are not restricted to the influence of Language poetry, but in the post-Language context of the "Empty Texas" series it is appropriate to relate these aspects of Minter's poetics to the influence of Language writing because it emphasises that his poetics is not built upon an aggressive attack which aims to negate Language writing. Acknowledging that Minter both incorporates and critiques the poetics of Language poetry presents his engagement as a postmodern approach to innovation which involves "mutation (gradual change as an articulation of difference), fusion (the synthesis of diverse attributes to produce a distinctly new quality), and renovation (reviving the castoffs and misfits of formerly threadbare poetics)" (Conte 11).

### Subjectivity and the Lyric 'I' in Lust

*"Lust"* (the third poem in the series) offers one of the more explicit engagements with the poetics of Language poetry, and in particular that aspect of the poetics that deals with subjectivity. In this poem Minter playfully criticises Language poets' attempts to erase "the transcendental Ego, of the authentic self, of the Poet as lonely Genius, of a unique artistic style" (Perloff, "Language Poetry and Lyric Subject" 3), and he allows his own sense of subjectivity a place within the poem. For the purpose of clarity, the entire poem is quoted:

*Lust*

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> "*Her remark how <u>I</u> fly*
> *at miotic jargon, the pluripolar distracting a method*
> *of indirect division, as if by chance you should ever be!*"     I wonder,
> whose combination of incidents
>
> accumulating degrees of withdrawal
> and glare conversationalism,
> that well worn mathematical limit again, like, Fucking Symbols Up
> in God's Tree ("*I am the live pillar, the nutgall asymptote!*"
>                   all unrepentant middle though
>
> & sucking up glass channels   he says   If only people knew what was
>        going on
> in my mind
>
>               again
>
> oysters slice open currents, foam out the reverb,
>              Trojan Horse
>         (not wanting to destroy Da Fort
>                      just sits there like any other code,
> all oak splinters & hydro effluvia, concept & drainage
>
>        the cork floats on and on. (36)

Subjectivity here is fluid and undefined: the poem does not clarify who the female subject in line one is, nor does the poem clarify who the conversing subject is (conversation is signified by quotation marks and italics).  The underlined 'I' in line one is the subject retelling the story of 'her remark' and this could be the 'I' who wonders in line three but it may not be.  It could be that the conversing subject is speaking to the 'I' who wonders and the retold remarks stimulate the narrating subject to "wonder".  In this sense, both the form and content of verse paragraph one foreground conversation and dialogue as important components of the thinking subject.   Stimulated by the conversation, the narrating subject wonders about the subject matter of the poem: the "combination of incidents", the Trojan Horse, the floating cork, etcetera.

This subject can also be related to Minter himself: the poet wondering about a poetics built on attempts to erase the poet's subjectivity from poetry. The female subject's remarks suggest that the 'I' conversing reacts to ("*fly[s] / at*") "*miotic jargon, the pluripolar distracting a method / of indirect division*". These remarks relate to a disease of the eye/'I'. Miosis is the "excessive contraction of the pupil of the eye, as the result of disease, drugs, or the like" (*Macquarie* 1095) and "contraction" is "to shorten (a word, etc.) by combining or omitting some of its elements" (*Macquarie* 404). In relation to the poetics of Language poetry, excessive contraction of the eye refers to an extreme reduction and omission of the lyric 'I' or a sense of the poet's subjective self. Attempts to contract or omit the lyric 'I' occurred because of Language poets' dis-ease with the way 'Official Verse Culture' and neo-romantic lyric poetry glorify and grant full authority to the lyric 'I'. Minter signposts or emphasises that the subject matter of the poem involves the lyric 'I' by graphically drawing attention to the "*I*" with an underline (first line). Associative signification processes created through rhyme construct meaning: the literal meaning of miosis, "excessive contraction of the pupil of the eye, as the result of disease" (*Macquarie* 1095), becomes a disease of the 'I'. The aural qualities of the term "*miotic*" with its stress on *i* also builds on the accumulative meaning making processes. Similarly, "*pluripolar*" connotes multiple (pluri) oppositions (polar signifying opposites) to the ego-centered 'I' and it also draws attention to the physical shape of the grapheme 'I' which is like a pole. It also suggests that the multiple poles or 'I's of Language poetry involve "*distracting a method*" which can be read as a method that works to divert attention away from the poet's subjectivity or authoritative 'I'. That is, multiplying the lyric 'I' in Language poetry is a method which acknowledges the multiplicity of subjectivity and it distracts readers from the presence of the poet's own 'I'. Distracting also defines what type of method Language poets use because to distract is to divide: the divided 'I' is a

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fragmented and multiple 'I'.  This meaning is built upon by the word "*division*" in line three.

Yet another connotation calls upon the Latin meaning of the word 'distracting': "L. *distractus,* pp., pulled asunder. Cf. DISTRAUGHT" (*Macquarie* 523) and suggests that the pulling apart of the lyric 'I', like the disease of the 'I', is both a result of distress (due to official verse culture) and causes distress (post-Language poetics).  The meaning of the last part of line three, "*as if by chance you should ever be!*", is perhaps undecidable but in conjunction with the exclamation mark, it brings a ridiculing tone to the poem.  The sarcasm of "*Her remark*", "*as if by chance you should ever be!*" suggests that the conversing subject will 'never be'.  Not surprisingly the conversing subject retells her remarks with a tone of indignity because they are insulting, but the subject matter of her final remark is not clarified.  The sarcasm of "*as if by chance you should ever be!*" is clear, but just what the conversing subject will never be is not. Will he or she never be a poet with the fame and glory of the Language poets?  Be a subject who is not divided?

The dialogue stimulates the narrating subject to "wonder" about a "combination of incidents" which can be related to the poetics of Language poets and their disease of the 'I'. Line five's opposing words, "accumulating" and "withdrawal", relate to a poetics based on the withdrawal of the poet's personal self from poetry and suggest that the "degrees of withdrawal" have had an "accumulating" effect.  This can mean that the number of times Language poets have withdrawn their subjectivity from a poem has been successful because it has amassed a greater effect.  However, it can also mean that the opposite effect has resulted.  That is, the poet's personal self has "accumulated", built up, accrued, increased, or amassed, despite contrary attempts.  In "combination" with their methods of withdrawal is line six's strangely phrased incident, "and glare conversationalism".  Certainly this builds on

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the importance of conversation as it is emphasised in the first verse paragraph, but while conversational connotes casualness, conversational*ism* suggests formality. Thus, "conversationalism" can include many different types of discussions: conversations and interviews, poetic statements, essays, articles and theories ('isms'). The choice of word, and in particular the formal quality added with the 'ism', suggests that what was presented as a casual chat or conversation has become reified into a formal theory or 'ism' which uses "*jargon*" (line two). As an adjective describing a formal form of discussion or "conversationalism", "glare" suggests that the discussions/poetic statements/interviews of Language poets (those practicing the methods of withdrawal of subjectivity) are characterised by "showiness" and are "too brilliantly ornamented" (*Macquarie* 745). In association with these meanings, "glare" is something that prevents viewers from seeing what is there; the exaggerated brightness or showiness can hide things. In relation to Minter's critique of the poetics of Language poetry, "glare conversationalism" suggests that what was once a mere conversation, has become a dazzling discourse.

Lines seven and eight present another of the "combination of incidents" considered by the wondering subject of the poem: "that well worn mathematical limit again, like, Fucking Symbols Up / in God's Tree (*"I am the live pillar, the nutgall asymptote!"*/ all unrepentant middle though". The physicality or material entity of the grapheme 'I' is emphasised with this line of long, slender shapes and italics, and the exclamation mark adds to the visual effect. Graphically 'I' is the same as the numeral one ("mathematical limit") and 'I' is a pillar, an "upright shaft or structure . . . relatively slender in proportion to its height" (*Macquarie* 1291). Each of these has other connotations: numerically, the sacred One is God, the omnipotent One, and a pillar 'I' is "a person who is a chief support of a state, institution, etc.: *a pillar of*

*society*" (*Macquarie* 1291).  "Fucking Symbols Up / in God's Tree", with its ironic use of capitals, is a sacrilegious phrase.  Does it suggest that Language poets' tampering with the symbol 'I' is also sacrilegious?  Or is the poem suggesting that the poetics of Language poetry replaced one sacred 'I' with another?  The bracketed sentence works as an explanation or demonstration of the sacrilegious act, for the God like pillar 'I' is the secular (live) pillar who has grown like a "nutgall" in God's Tree.  This secular 'I' is a "nutgall" which suggests it is an abnormal or disfiguring growth or addition.  Given the sacred, secular and literary symbolism of the oak tree, it is interesting that the nutgall is particularly common and problematic for oak trees (*Macquarie* 1173).  The "nutgall" is a rounded form but in this poem the mathematical term and obscure word, "asymptote", ensures the nutgall is a straight line like the letter 'I'.  Lines seven and eight could be read as explanations of the poetics of Language poetry and their attempts to subvert the God-like 'I', but "again" and "all unrepentant middle though" undercut this reading.  In particular, "again" suggests that the secular 'I' has risen to God-like proportions in Language poetry and Language poets have become the live pillars of poetry.  The subversive poetics of the Language poets becomes 'One' with what they were attempting to subvert.

If Language poets are those "whose combinations of incidents" involve the methods of "withdrawal" (of subjectivity), showy discussions ('isms'), and subversive ways with language/symbols ("Fucking Symbols Up / in God's Tree"), they may also be presented as the male who speaks: "If only people knew what was / going on / in my mind / again".  It is as if secretly and ironically those who sought to erase their subjectivity now want people to know about their subjective self.  Or does the poem suggest that this was always the case?  If "again" is read in connection with these comments by the male subject then it seems that

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Language poets' attempts to erase their subjectivity from poetry did not mean that their own subjectivity was excluded. The "again" negates the Language poet's innocence, as if to say, we have repetitively heard what goes on in your mind. Perhaps this refers to the overwhelming amount of critical and theoretical articles and books that Language poets have produced in conjunction with their poetry.

Minter's critique of the poetics of Language writers suggests that although they wanted to dismantle the authority of the lyric 'I', their excessive contraction of the lyric 'I' did not remove it but repressed it so that the reverse actually occurred. This is especially evoked with the term "Da Fort", which is a reversal of Freud's Fort Da (Minter, Email to Author. 19 Nov. 1999), the game Freud played with his grandson:

> Watching his grandson playing in his pram one day, Freud observed him throwing a toy out of the pram and exclaiming *fort*! (gone away), then hauling it in again on a string to the cry of *da*! (here). This, the famous *fort-da* game, Freud interpreted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as the infant's symbolic mastery of its mother's absence; but it can also be read as the first glimmerings of narrative. *Fort-da* is perhaps the shortest story we can imagine: an object is lost, and then recovered. (Eagleton 185)

The poem can be read as suggesting that Language poets' attempts to make the authority of the lyric 'I' 'go away' through the erasure or omission of their subjectivity has not rid them of authority. What was lost (*fort*) has now been found or returned (*da*). This other form is the authority Language poets now possess: they occupy positions in universities and, as Mark Wallace discusses in "Emerging Avant Garde Poetries and the 'Post-Language Crisis", their authority and domination is one of the major problems facing America's post-Language poets . "*Lust*" suggests that the fort, Da Fort, has been built by Language poets (whether intentional or not is irrelevant), and their game of ridding their poetry of the authority of the

lyric 'I' worked only to repress this authority. And like Freud's grandson's game which depended on a return, repression always runs the risk of a return.

Perhaps this is how the title of the poem works with the critique. As just about everything Freud wrote about concerned lust and sex it is not surprising to find a lusty title for a poem which plays with Freud's fort-da game. Remembering that Freud read the fort-da game as "symbolic mastery of its [his grandson's] mother's absence", the fort-da game involves the desire of the child for the mother, and desire is never far away from lust. In the case of the male Language poets, it is not the mother they wish to make absent, it is the phallic Father, 'I'. However, in questioning the phallic Father, Language poets have actually usurped his position and become powerful 'I's themselves. Minter's critique here resonates with the post-Language American poet, John Noto, who states that Language poets "would have us believe that there is no "I", that the "I" is merely a product of ego. Sadly, they have forgotten that there is one undeniable "I": the one who authors, submits, publishes, and goes after chairs at major universities!" (187).

The "Trojan Horse" of line fifteen may relate to Charles Bernstein's comments about John Kinsella's poetry (as Kinsella informs in a *Southerly* interview): "The American poet and theorist, Charles Bernstein, has called this "the Kinsella Trojan horse theory of poetry" – get inside it and make yourself acceptable, and then dismantle it" ("John Kinsella, Through His Poetry" 167). In relation to the poetics of Language poetry, "*Lust*" suggests that there is actually little dismantling in process, and rather than destroying the powerful citadels (The Fort/Da Fort), 'I' "just sits there like any other code".

Line thirteen, a single solitary "again", which I have read in relation to what "he says", is also connected to the oysters slicing open currents. This is an extremely organic image which represents an organic concept. The "currents" of the oceans are also currents in poetic movements: perpetual, predictable to a certain degree, neither right nor wrong. Similarly, poetic movements are like "the cork [which] floats on and on" constantly bobbing up and down with the currents. These organic images imbue Minter's critique of the poetics of Language poetry within a framework of inevitability: his poetics is not more correct than that of the Language poets, rather Minter's post-Language poetics is yet another oyster slicing open the current movement. This movement of currents leaves Minter's post-Language poetics open to similar problems in the future. That is, just as Minter criticises Language poetry his poetics risks being similarly criticised in the future. This is one way of reading the emphasis and contrasting forms of conversation in verse paragraphs one and two: conversation in verse paragraph one is positive and stimulating of thought, but in verse paragraph two conversation is negatively signified because it has become reified into a theory ('ism'). As inevitable as the oceans currents is the inevitability that Minter's poetics will in time be "no longer interesting". Unlike the judgmental assumptions, aggressive accusations and attempts to position one's own poetics as the 'right' approach to poetry, which have characterised the 'poetry wars' in Australia and which abound in Lew Daly's (American post-Language poet) opposition to Language poets ("The Contextual Imperative"), Minter works simultaneously with and against the poetics of Language poetry, and he does not attempt to claim superiority for his own poetic practice.

***"Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry"[3]: the Lyricality of  Minter's Post-Language Poetry***

One of the differences between Minter's poetry and Language poetry involves poetic musicality.  Whereas Minter's poetry is composed of harmonious sounds which create lyrical music, Language poetry is frequently described as non-musical or as Perloff suggests, it is "mathematical rather than musical in its form" (*Radical Artifice* xi). (In relation to Language poetry, this is a difficult topic because it relies upon an extreme generalisation.  However, it is a notable difference between Minter's poetry and Language poetry and therefore it requires discussion.) As the etymology of the word 'lyric' denotes, lyricality in poetry defines a sound or music made on the "*lyra,* a musical instrument" (Greek); it fills the air with a sweet melodic sound ("Cl.Gr. *melic,* or *mele* (air, melody)") and can be sung ("Ch. *shi* or *ci.* (word song)" (Preminger et al. 713).  Lyricality in poetry is defined according to those "elements which evidence its origins in musical expression – singing, chanting, and recitation to musical accompaniment" (Preminger et al. 713).

> The irreducible denominator of all l.[yric] poetry must, therefore, comprise those elements which it shares with the musical forms that produced it. Although l.[lyric] poetry is not music, it is representative of music in its sound patterns, basing its meter and rhyme on the regular linear measure of the song; or more remotely, it employs cadences and consonance to approximate the tonal variation of a chant or intonation. Thus the l.[lyric] retains structural or substantive evidence of its melodic origins, and this factor serves as the categorical principle of poetic lyricism.
>
> In the 20th c.[entury], critics, predicating the musical essence of l.[yric] as its vital characteristic, have come close to formulating an exact and inclusive definition of l.[yric]. "Words build into their poetic meaning by building into sound…sound in composition: music" (R. P. Blackmur).  "A poet does not compose *in order to* make of lang. delightful and exciting music; he composes a delightful and exciting music in lang. *in order to* make what he has to say peculiarly efficacious in our minds" (Lascelles Abercrombie). (Preminger et al. 714-715).

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[3] "Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry: Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry by Women" is the title of a conference held at Barnard College New York April 8-10 1999. For details see http://jacket magazine.com/06/barnard.html and *American Women Poets in the 21ˢᵗ Century: Where Lyric Meets Language,* 2002. Eds. Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr. Wesleyan University Press: Middleton, Connecticut.

Because this definition of lyricality is so closely connected to the definition of all poetry, the absence of it in Language poetry has led to descriptions like "anti-poetic" (Tranter interviewed by Ted Slade). Similarly, Joseph Duemer contrasts the "beauty of the melody" of a Vietnamese folk song – emphasising the oral tradition of poetry – with the "graphic noise" of (Language poet) Susan Howe's writing which, he states "leave[s] me cold". The late American poet Ramez Qureshi suggests that Language poetry is "divorced from the lyrical resources of musicality available to poets", thus he defines Nick Piombino as unique because he is the only "lyrical Language Poet".

The lyricality, or more appropriately, sound of Language poetry is not musical in the traditional sense of music composed on a lyre. Bernstein distinguishes Language poetry's sound from that of lyric poetry: "Not that this is "lyric" poetry, insofar as that term may assume a musical, or metric, *accompaniment* to the words: the music rather is built into the sequence of the words' tones, totally saturating the text's sound" ("Language Sampler" 76). The 'music' of Language poetry is not lyrically harmonious like a piece of classical music; it has more in common with the music of the street. The 'music' of Language poetry, like Bernstein's "Dear Mr. Fanelli", reminds me more of hip-hop or rap than a symphony by Beethoven or Mozart:

> I saw your picture
> in the 79th street
> station. You said
> you'd be interested
> in any comments I
> might have on the
> condition of the
> station. Mr. Fanelli,
> there is a lot of
> debris in the 79th street
> station that makes it
> unpleasant to wait in

for more than a few
minutes. The station
could use a paint
job and maybe
new speakers so you
could understand
the delay announcements
that are always being
broadcast. Mr.
Fanelli – there are
a lot of people sleeping
in the 79th street station
& it makes me sad
to think they have no
home to go to. Mr.
Fanelli, do you think
you could find a more
comfortable place for them
to rest? It's pretty noisy
in the subway, especially with
all those express trains
hurtling through every
few minutes, anyway when the
trains are in service. (the poem is just over four pages long, in *My Way*, 58-59)

Bernstein's use of repetition, especially "Mr Fanelli" and "79th street", is typical of the way rappers use repetition to orientate their songs and stress their message. The consistent beat of the short lines, broken for maximum beat effect rather than sense, mirrors the beat-orientated sounds of rap and hip-hop music. A discussion on the topic of Language poetry and music on the UB Poetics email list did not define any particular music style compatible with the sound of Language poetry although a few contributors suggested that "New Music", jazz and John Cage's music offered appropriate models (Smith, Levy, Davis, Horihan. Online postings to UB Poetics, "Re: Language Poetry and Music" 22-23 Aug. 1995). It was also pointed out that there are "direct connections" between Language poets and New Music: "Lyn Hejinian is wed to a member" of "The Rova Saxophone Quartet"; "Bruce Andrews' significant one is dancer Sally Silvers, they have worked together with

many new music sorts including John Zorn, [and] Bruce often composes music for Sally's company." (Smith Re: Language Poetry and Music 22 Aug 1995). The sound of New Music (or contemporary-classical music) is not consistently harmonious. For example, the performances of one of Australia's leading New Music ensembles, Elision, are described in terms of a "prevailing tone of chaos constantly if barely ordered" (Kevin Gallasch), "chaotic and meaningless tangle of notes" (Richard Barrett), "jangled" (Daryl Buckley), and "soothing chords . . . rapidly transform into screeching histrionics" (Catherine Howell).

In relation to the sound of Language poetry, Perloff quotes the following from Language poet Douglas Messerli's "When the Wind Blows":

        slow grain insistence, lust
        er of facts click
        & gone. that quick
        ens every vessel, transport
        in the temptation to "stand your
        ground" into earth
        quake & bolt against
        to from. certain
        sentiments settle
        back with the sediment
        losing track
        of actions, sleep
        ing straight as a rock
        bed that sudden
        ly rattles right
        into rhythm, training
        what minds trick
        with the flickers of hearts
        to spare
        the child despair.

Perloff's discussion of the sound or musicality of this poem differentiates it from Yeats's "The Second Coming":

Rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition – all these are prominent in "When the Wind Blows" but sound recurrence as such is not what distinguishes this poem from any number of poems that have nothing to do with the Language movement. Rather, we might say that here the sound structure is generative . . . Messerli's syntax has no truck with what Yeats called "the natural words in the natural order"; on the contrary, it is the sound associations here that domesticate the 'lust/er of facts' and determine the nature of the 'lullaby'. ("The Word As Such" 1984. 19)

The 'music' of Language poetry is not like that of Yeats, for it is more akin to "our new technologized language":

Indeed, poetry is now engaging the codes of the videotape playback, the telephone answering machine, and the computer, especially in its capacity, via modem, to address our computer terminals (*Poetic License* 29).

Paradoxically, "the discourse of technology rejected at one level as no more than the discourse of the dominant ideology, returns in the very structure, both aural and visual, of the poetic text" (28-29).

In contrast to Language poetry, the sound or lyricality of Minter's poetry is consistently harmonious. Minter creates "cadence and consonance" (Preminger et al. 715) with poetic devices like consonance, "swept over constantly", "all winter long / legs calmly cover sacred ground" (49), and assonance, "To film those oncological surrounds / About Power" (47), "monologic / translated here as metabolism / drifts from the throat, /becomes lobster" (40), "the common act compulsion" (38). Alliteration is prominent: "traversed again, tossing / and turning off" (45), "reverent feathery references" (41), "Leaves pixillate / to invisibility" (38), "ice forms on the fingernail, the periphery falling" (38), "She says she / she fears the flag" (38), "a mirror of cities mistaken as petals" (38), "slippery glimpse" (34). Repetition is successfully used to lyric affect, "the cork floats on and on" (36), "fold / together like grass, the grass" (39), "the bird falls, visibility falls" (38), "it wasn't natural anyway / that natural anyway" (42). Euphony creates a liquid sound:

come out of it & pull myself together, the long dust these years from which
some kind of *formal statement* might stay fairly anchored but, well, a larger
view accumulates &
finds itself some altitude toward the world ("Beige" 41);

just it was summer then,
the decade The Olgas looked sooner than the elegiac majesty of Tao
                           to shave off another second in the wheatfield ("Liver" 40);

The actinomeric flowers
are reimagined here (weight 'counter-balanced by the lift
in a honey-eater's wings
hovering over phosphorescent flowers, chromatic scale
                           pushing ultraviolet ("Blotto" 42).

The tone is gentle rather than harsh, harmonious rather than discordant. Variation often occurs in a rhythmic pattern, consonance followed by assonance or vice versa to create lyrical effect:

Is that better, after seven weeks of Saving Face
or the who we love to admonish, Levinas
                   joining the Ranks of The Palace & caught through
                       the wish bone,
                                    transversed again, tossing
                   and turning off ("Gaf" 45).

In his review of *Empty Texas* Pybus acknowledges the "more traditional modes" and the "fairly conventional, often lyric, tones" of Minter's poetry but he confines this to the first and third sections of the collection while "the central, eponymous section" (the "Empty Texas" series) remains untouched by tradition because of its radical experimentation. However, this is not correct, for all of the above examples of lyricality are from the "central, eponymous section".


Minter's conjugation of lyricality and experimentation subverts the dichotomous relations between categories like experimental and conventional. Similarly, terms usually applied to open and closed texts, like those Hejinian uses, lose their boundaries. Minter's open poems

can be described in terms of "harmony" and "nostalgia" – those aspects of the readerly satisfying closed texts, as Hejinian reminds us. Nostalgia is related to expectations and because of the 'conventional' lyricality Minter's poetry can function on this nostalgic level. That is, the sound of Minter's poetry is seductively comforting because aurally it is like 'conventional' poetry. However, the linguistic innovations of Minter's poetry are not conventional and thwart expectations of normative grammar and syntax.

It is not an accident that Language poets do not try to seduce their readers in this way. In his long essay-poem, "Artifice of Absorption", Language poet Charles Bernstein differentiates between a poetics of "absorption" and his poetics of "non-absorption":

> by *absorption* I mean engrossing, engulfing
> completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie,
> attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding,
> mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting,
> enthralling: belief, conviction, silence.

On the other hand is his poetry which is characterised by:

> *Impermeability* [which] suggests artifice, boredom,
> exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction,
> digression, interruptive, transgressive,
> undecorous, anticonventional, unintegrated, fractured,
> etc. (*A Poetics* 29)

For Bernstein 'absorbent' poetry seduces readers and can easily be consumed because meaning is clear (poetry as commodity). Thus, absorbent poetry works within the regimes of the capitalist market. In contrast is Bernstein's poetry which is deliberately obscure or 'non-absorbent' so as to prevent easy consumption in the market place. Yet Minter's poetry can be described in both ways because the harmonious lyricality makes it absorbent, "engrossing, engulfing completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie". Bernstein's absorbent qualities are also poetry's seductive qualities and as the reception and reputation of Minter's poetry

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demonstrates, critics and poets alike have been seduced. Indeed, Philip Mead draws attention to the seductiveness of Minter's poetry by entitling his review of *Empty Texas,* "Seductive Writing". However, Minter's poetry cannot be easily 'consumed' because it is "anticonventional", "fractured, etc.".

In its lyricality Minter's post-Language poetry resonates with the post-Language poetry discussed by John Noto in the American journal *Talisman* (1993). Noto states that the post-Language poets he is associated with "use their supersonic flights of lyric infinity to pull from strange loops of information blown in their ears in discrete voices the diskette containing the memory of the beauty of stars" (187). These poets are described as "a loosely knit, and as yet quite small, "group" of poets for whom "language-centered" writing is already a history to be learned from and responded to" (185); included are Andrew Joron, Darin De Stefano, David Hoefer, Will Alexander. Noto suggests that his poetry and that of these other post-Language poets

> pulls for a full-blown return to music and lyricism in poetry, though as unlike traditional (or "updated" college review-ish) lyric poetry as the voice and rhythms of "rave" trance music are from those of the classical symphony, as dissimilar as the movement in abstract techno-metallurgical sculpture is from that in a Donatello (188).

Although Noto is at pains to suggest that the lyricality of these post-Language poets is "unlike traditional . . . lyric poetry", he is commenting on the result not the poetic devices that create lyricality. That is, traditional lyric poetry conjugating with language-orientated poetry does not necessarily sound nor look like traditional lyric poetry but it is formed by similar means. As Noto states, it is "an aesthetics which paradoxically combines elements of the pace, style, and jargon of the info-media environment [read experimental/language orientated] with varieties of soaring epiphany [read traditional lyric mode]" (188-189).

### *Australia Ready for Experimental Poetry?*

Seductive lyricism and experimentation are rare companions in the world of poetry, for usually experimentation creates discomfort for readers mostly because of the estrangement or the 'making strange' that occurs. As Perloff suggests, readers are not seduced by Language poetry because when "[c]onfronted for the first time by the poetry of say, [Language poets] Michael Palmer or Lyn Hejinian or Steve McCaffery, the reader is likely to lose patience" (*Radical Artifice* 45). Minter's poetry is quite unique in its combination of seductive lyricism and linguistic innovation or experimentation and this conjugation may have contributed to the positive reception his poetry has received. Since publishing the post-Language "Empty Texas" series Minter's poetry has gained much attention and he has obtained prestigious positions in the Australian poetry milieu. In 2000 Minter became the poetry editor of *Meanjin,* one of the most esteemed literary journals in Australia; *Empty Texas* won the exalted Dinny O'Hearn Poetry Prize in the *Age* Book of the Year Awards (judged by Gig Ryan who is also published by Paper Bark Press and who launched *Empty Texas* in Melbourne); and he was awarded the Marten Bequest Traveling Scholarship for Poetry, which enabled him to read his poetry at the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetics. Minter has also participated on numerous panel discussions at Writers' Festivals, Poetry Festivals and conferences. Minter's reputation does not solely emanate from his post-Language poetry for he was 'known' within the Sydney poetry community before 1999. In 1994 his poem, "Autumn Turn, Katoomba Storm" was highly commended in the Varuna Regional Writing Competition (poetry section), he established and edited the *Varuna New Poetry* broadsheet (10 issues 1995-1998) and was founding editor of *Cordite Poetry Review* (with Adrian Wiggins) in 1997 (edited and designed the first three issues). His first collection,

*Rhythm in a Dorsal Fin* (1995), was published by Ron Pretty's Five Islands Press (as part of the New Poets Series 3) and received three favourable reviews, including Ivor Indyk in *Australian Book Review* (1996) and James Tulip in *Voices* (1996). It was also short-listed for the New South Wales Premier's Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize. With the publication of the post-Language poetry of *Empty Texas* Minter's reputation grew substantially.

No doubt the publication of *Empty Texas* by Robert Adamson and Juno Gemes' Paper Bark Press, in a stylishly presented publication, assisted the successful distribution of the collection. This collection is part of the first set of books Adamson and Gemes published in conjunction with Fine Arts Press; the other poets were Jennifer Maiden, Kevin Hart, Peter Steele and David Malouf (all highly regarded and established poets in Australia). The presentation of these books is exquisitely sophisticated: each has an elegant pewter-coloured border and glossy photo on the cover and every detail has been aesthetically considered to produce a set of books of high quality. To complement the presentation of Minter's collection are the endorsements from distinguished poets, John Kinsella (Australia) and Ron Silliman (a major 'Language poet', America).

In contrast to the positive reception Minter has received, experimental poetry in Australia in the past has mostly been ignored, treated with suspicion, or worse still, ridiculed. As Vickery suggests:

> 'Experimental' [poetry in Australia] is a dirty word and being difficult to read is going to win you no friends (translate as 'award and funding system') at all. Criticism such as Geoff Page's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Australian Poetry* has diligently emphasised the more traditional or coherent strands in many an Australian poet's work while stepping politely and quietly around their more adventurous projects. ("Beyond Strictly Verse and Pulp Diction" 126)

Indeed, Language poetry – one of the most experimental poetics of the late twentieth century – was largely ignored in Australia. Not until 1991, almost twenty years after Language poets were beginning to emerge in America, did Language poetries receive substantial critical attention in Australia. This was in a special issue of *Meanjin* which featured a section on Language poetry (the poetry section was edited by Philip Mead). Here Sigi Curnow's article is excellent for its mapping of experimental language poetry as practised in Australia and the interconnecting relationships between American language poets and Australian poets. Curnow comments that

> Language poetry takes its place within a wider history of the avant-garde in Australia. Australia's connections with the American Language poets already have a history, and the number of significant writers practicing in Australia indicates a healthy local involvement in experimental writing. ( 172)

Curnow suggests that in Australia the experimental poetry of Syd Clayton in the late 1960s and early 70s "prefigures some of the concerns preoccupying Language writers today" (172). Those involved in experimentation in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s include Jas H. Duke, Alex Selenitsch, Chris Mann, Pete Spence, Kris Hemensley, Nicholas Zurbrugg and others. (Curnow also discusses the experimental poetry occurring simultaneously in New Zealand.)


Yet not long after this Language poetry issue of *Meanjin* the *Australian Book Review* published two articles that rebutted this relevance. Rosemary Sorenson addressed this subject in her article, tellingly entitled "N=O  R=E=S=P=O=N=S=E" (1992). She suggests that "there has been little debate, little interest, and few practitioners of language poetry in Australia to date":

> Say 'language poetry' to someone in Australia and  you can just about be sure that you'll get no response. A 'storm of silence' is how poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe describes the reaction to several articles and poems published in *Meanjin* last year (1/1991) . . . 'Tell me what it is and I'll tell you what I think of it' is how Collins

A&R poetry publisher, Tom Thompson, responded to my question about what he thought about language poetry.

Poet Jennifer Straus, who is also an academic, was apologetic about not 'keeping up' (the name language poetry, especially when it is written in the way that it was inscribed on one of the small press journals where it first became known – L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E – sounds as though it is something one *should* keep up with). (61)

After Sorenson's limited description of Language poetry, Strauss' response is thus reported:

A silence. Then Jennifer Strauss cautiously and diplomatically suggested that it was not the kind of poetry she would find much interest in. 'As someone who is stubbornly attached to sense in poetry', she said, 'I can't subscribe to deconstructing *sense*'. (61)

Sorenson suggests, in the form of a rhetorical question, that Language poetry is not "worth paying attention to … at all" (61). Laurie Duggan's article in the same issue of the *Australian Book Review* is not as dismissive, but he reinforces the perception that Language poetries are of little consequence to Australia's poets:

I don't know whether there are any Australian poets who would want to declare themselves as 'Language' writers – Chris Mann maybe – but there are certainly a few who would be sympathetic towards the kind of writing laid out in Ron Silliman's anthology *In The American Tree*. (60)

Duggan prefers to draw demarcation lines between Language poetry and performance poetry and unfortunately does not expand on this comment.

Yet, like the *Meanjin* issue, my research of experimental poetry in Australia suggests that there were indeed poets interested in Language poetry, even if it was not defined as such. As early as 1975 Kris Hemensley published a special Language poetry issue of *The Ear in the Wheatfield* entitled "Writing/Writing". In this issue Hemensley drew together those who are now famously known as Language poets: Clark Coolidge, Michael Palmer, and Michael Davidson. And perhaps even more fascinating is the international context he gave to Language poetry by featuring poetry of similar experimentation by Colin Symes

(Wollongong Australia), Edmond Jabes (born in Cairo, lives in France, translated by Language poet Rosemary Waldrop), and Anthony Barnett (Norway).

Similarly, Australia's Pete Spence has been involved with Language poets since the seventies. His small publishing venture, PostNeo, published Language poet Hannah Weiner in 1985 and he continues to publish her work. Some of his poetry is also similar to Language poetry, but this is more familiar overseas than in Australia. Language poet Johanna Drucker mentions Spence, along with Steve McCaffery and Susan Howe, as "people whose profiles as poets/writers parallel mine in their interest in visual poetry and its theoretical and historical dimensions" ("Figuring the Word"). In our email discussions I mentioned to Spence that I was surprised that after the *Meanjin* special Language poetry issue more attention was not drawn towards experimental poetry in Australia. I believed that this was the intention of the editor, Philip Mead, but in fact the reverse occurred. Spence commented that those interested in Language poetry "knew we would be dead in the water after that issue and we were" (Email to Author. 8 March 2000). The reason Spence gives for the exclusion of experimental poetry in Australian literary journals is political:

> It seemed to be political and more in house info etc etc, like after Mead left Meanjin (Sigi Curnow went to New York), Laurie Duggan was now the poetry editor of Meanjin and at the Jas Duke Memorial weekend where I was showing my film on Duke and having Cutts read my sound poem Zut, Laurie came up to me and said I would have little chance getting published in Meanjin while he was poetry editor (he didn't like the language stuff). Anyway I said to him that the Australians published in that language issue were not Card carrying members of any group, didn't help the cause though!

Spence continues to write and work with writers of innovative poetry, and although PostNeo has ceased he operates another small publishing venture called Mighty Thin Books. (To view some of Pete Spence's work visit http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/thalia/au-ps1.htm.)

Given this history of the reception of experimental poetry generally and Language poetry in particular it is surprising that Minter has received such a positive response. This positive reception cannot be understood in relation to America's post-Language poets and their poetry. As Mark Wallace points out in his essay tellingly entitled, "Emerging Avant Garde Poetries and the 'Post-Language Crisis" (1999), emerging in the shadow of Language poets America's post-Language poets struggle to "establish their own identity in the face of the success of language writing". Perhaps the difference between Language poetry being an impediment (as it is for America's post-Language poets) and an enabling influence (as it is for Australia's post-Language poets) is due to the fact that, unlike America's post-Language poets, Australia's post-Language poets have not emerged in the shadow of a predominant group of poets. Unlike the eighties in America, Australia did not see the rise of an important group of poets. While there were many new and interesting poets to emerge in that decade, including Alex Skovron, Jan Owen, Alison Clark, Diane Fahey, Philip Hodgins, and many others, these poets did not and still have not received a great deal of attention. The situation of Australia's new eighties poets has more in common with America's new nineties or post-Language poets than with those poets who emerged in the eighties in America because they too emerged in the shadow of a predominant group of poets: the 'Generation of '68'. Regardless of the innovations of poets emerging in the immediate years after the 'Generation of '68' (or even simultaneously), it seems that the Australian poetry world was not yet ready for any new changes and so they were mostly ignored.

Like all poetry that is positively received there are many contributing reasons to explain one's success (or failure) and I am not suggesting that Minter's unusual fusion of seductive lyricism

and linguistic experimentation is *the* definitive reason for his successful reception.  However, in conjunction with those reasons discussed above it appears that this is one of the differences between Minter's poetics and Language poetry's poetics has contributed to the successful reception of Minter's poetry.

### *A Reason for Different Poetics: Dominating Technologies - From Mass Media to Digital Tectonics*

One reason Minter's poetics differs from the poetics of Language writing arises because Language poets have responded to the dominance of the mass media in the seventies and eighties, while Minter can be understood as responding to the newer technologies of the nineties, including genetic engineering and digitalisation.  Perloff argues that Language poetry has been "shaped" by the "*Donahue Show* and MTV, of *People* magazine and the *National Enquirer*, of Internet and MCI mail relayed around the world by modem" (*Radical Artifice* xiii) and suggests Language poets both react "against the languages of TV and advertising" (19) and use the new technologies to produce poetry (26).  Perloff's analysis of Lesley Scalapino's poetry discusses poetic methods in relation to technology like cinema and video (50-51) and Charles Bernstein's deconstruction of the image works against what he calls the "imagabsorption" of our media world where the "'*im-position* of the image on the mind' from without" is total (78).  Rebelling against the natural look and sound of 'media speak', Language poets have turned "toward *artifice*" to draw attention to "the poetic medium as *constructed* and *rule-governed*" (47).  Perloff discusses Johanna Drucker's *The Word Made Flesh* in terms of a reaction against the use of language in our billboard culture: "it is the alphabet itself that is made flesh, the letter being seen in all its visual potential, as if to say that, desensitized as we are by the endless billboard discourse around us, we have almost forgotten the astonishing power of the alphabet to create human meanings" (121).  It is this

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reaction that produces difficult poetry that subverts normal rules of grammar or "logical connection[s]" between words (105). "'Making strange' now occurs at the level of phrasal and sentence structure rather than at the level of the image cluster so that poetic language cannot be absorbed into the discourse of the media" (78). There are many similarities between the politics of Language poetry and the politics of postmodernism as advocated by Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). Both offer a "compromised politics" (2) because they cannot offer an "effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*" (3). Nevertheless, the "politics of representation" (Burgin in Hutcheon 3) and attention to the constructedness of what we deem 'natural' (2) are political in that they are "inextricably bound up with a critique of domination" (Wellbery in Hutcheon 4). For Language poets this critique attends to the role of language in society and particularly the way language is used in the mass media.

By the 1990s our society is besieged by other forms of domination. Minter refers to these as the "broader tectonics that we're experiencing":

> the molecularisation of the subject and language, the reduction or breaking up of everything into capital, and on a global scale, the absorption of material environment into capital and to exchange whereby everything can be exchanged into bits of dollar. Equally everything is being digitalized into ones and zeroes. In genetics the same sort of thing is occurring in terms of information of the particular molecular structures which can be produced given specific arrangements or circumstances. ("A Sunday Morning Chat" 44)

One of the reasons Minter is concerned with these digitalising processes relates to how they affect and dominate society and construct subjectivity. The digitalisation of the world involves the digitalisation or "molecularisation" of people so that subjectivity is included in the "everything" of the following statement:

> there is this huge tectonic cultural process going on at the moment where everything is being broken down into bits that can be infinitely rearranged for the process of

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exchange. Unfortunately in a capitalist global economy this means processes of exchange that attend to money. (44)

This is the world of economic rationalism where people are reduced to a monetary value. It is also a world becoming dominated by genetic engineering where the rearrangement of "bits" (of people, animal and plant) by science, have unknown repercussions for the way we live and die. While we live with the effects of having our subjectivity reduced to a monetary value and know that the repercussions only serve those with power and money, the effects of genetic engineering remain a mystery.

The postmodern theories of Donnay Haraway attend to the domination of technology and she proposes ways language can subvert this domination. Haraway defines postmodernism as the "informatics of domination" in which the "common language" of technology creates the "translation of the world into a problem of coding" (163-164). "Immunobiology and associated medical practices are rich exemplars of the privilege of coding and recognition systems as objects of knowledge, as constructions of bodily reality for us" (164). Haraway's 'cyborg politics' focuses on language as a way to resist the domination of technology and its imperial coding, suggesting that writers need to investigate the "limits of language" (179):

> Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 176)

Minter discusses his poetry in ways that resonate with Haraway's cyborg politics: he is interested in "the logic" and "specific formations of how . . . bits are arranged" ("A Sunday Morning Chat" 44). When asked to clarify the politics of his poetry Minter explained that linguistically presented, his politics work by attending to

> microscopic detail from the level of an entire book right down to the level of how a letter, or spaces between letters, might function . . . getting inside the linguistic, the

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syntax, the grammar, punctuation and a particular form of lineation, and being able to push or condense or twist or in some way produce some kind of mutation of grammar or syntax (44).

Minter further clarifies his investigation of the translation of subjectivity by the "informatics of domination" when he contrasts it with the concerns of previous poetic investigations, like those of Language poetry: "unlike the poetics of the 20th Century, which were so much concerned with displacement and diaspora, what is important now is the understanding of the 'placement' of mobile subjectivity, in specific contexts as they move" (Email to Author. 20 Feb. 2002). This approach, this subversion of poetic language and style, takes as its central concern an investigation of the arrangement or movement of subjectivity.

This comment is made *after* the writing and publication of the "Empty Texas" series and reflects a change of focus in Minter's engagement with subjectivity in poetry. It is not surprising then that it is in Minter's later work, specifically the *Morning, Hyphen* series (published as a pamphlet in Vagabond Press' Rare Objects Series 2000), that his engagement with this issue is fully realised. However, in the "Empty Texas" series there are traces of Minter's interest in the organisation and placement of mobile subjectivity. Predominantly in the "Empty Texas" series, mobile subjectivity is placed in relation to the environment with seasons, land, oceans, rivers, gardens etc etera: "all winter long" the mobile subject's "legs" "calmly cover sacred ground" (*"Bliss"* 49); a mobile subject's "small" "foot" "touches and then retouches land" (*"Mythos"* 37); subjects define themselves in relation to the environment and "correspond thus: this world's matrix and border, / the windows of our house here & gentle &, the Morning Light" and the "days appear & / we describe ourselves, again / here at last" (52); in "winter" the subject watches "[l]eaves pixillate/ to invisibility" and birds falling from the sky (*"Scenic"* 38); one subject thinks of another in relation to "That Library

on the shore" (*"Beige"* 41). The atmospheric context of the mobile subject in *"Gravity"* is "that urban smell"

> of wish and self-pity
> almost glamorous as he dances to the radio,
> not touching water since her hands, unwelcome
> *such small senses of existence* (43).

The dancing male subject prolongs the embodied experience of his absent lover by attempting to immortalise their connection – her touch.


## '*Linguige*'

Whereas *"Lust"* focuses on a critique of the poetics of Language poetry, "*Linguige*" offers more of Minter's post-Language 'project' which he says involves remembering that subjectivity is "first molecular, atomic" and "this relation of materialities over time" is "the ground of the subject" (Minter, Email to Author. 19 Nov. 1999). Minter's post-Language poetics "explore[s] the slippages within and between subjectivities *as they are constituted by language and environment*" (Minter, Email to Author. 19 Nov. 1999):

> One of my primary tasks is to figure out a way between the 20th century's reduction of the subject, or inversions, of the poststructuralist era apex, and to find a way of using the lessons from all that via a regrouping of a sense of the subject with an attention to environment, biolinguisticism. (Email to Author. 19 Nov. 1999)

The poem is quoted in full:

> *Linguige*
>
> Content is a slippery glimpse, or so the light
>
> of three bodies, authenticated grace stretched blue under laying out the notes
>
> the Pacific Highway riddles into Sunne, moves northward as light tauter
>
> takes it or leaving it
>
> She lifts the terraform and
>
> and lays out escarpments of opposition, *tubes of frozen magma,* to have across

again plains beneath
the turquoise, the blue hills, the gum emigration

Épouvantail, espanata pajoros

even birdshit creates an open figure, composition by field marking out
what one might, essentially, know, the syllable
counting every movement. (34)

Attending to the "action of an environment on the figure" or subject (Minter, Email to Author. 19 Nov. 1999), "*Linguige*" attends to ephemeral moments of connections between the environment and subjectivity. When the light of the sun shines on the three bodies it alters the bodies – the three bodies become light ("so the light / of three bodies"). In contrast to the ego-centred sense of subjectivity criticised in "*Lust*", the One who proclaims *"I am the live pillar, the nutgall asymptote!"*, Minter's post-Language poetics focuses on a corporeal or embodied sense of subjectivity. Rather than a speaking persona, subjectivity is attended to via movement and the qualities of environmental contact. The subjects of this poem are three bodies of light who not only radiate light they become lighter and seem almost to float gracefully into the blue sky. Throughout the poem, subjectivity is as "slippery" as content: who is the woman who "lifts the terraform"? Is she the sun or one of the three bodies? Who is the "figure" hit by "birdshit"? There is not an omnipresent 'I' but there is "one [who] might, essentially, know". This subject (or "one") is the "figure" who Minter imagines as an Olsonian type scarecrow ("Épouvantail, espanata pajoros is 'scarecrow' in French and Spanish respectively") "in a field, [where] each birdshit, wave, crest of air" plays a role in creating/transforming the scarecrow/subject (Minter, Email to Author. 19 Nov. 1999). The random and arbitrary falling birdshit is both an "action of an environment" which can play a constitutive role in subjectivity and an action not unlike the

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composition of poetry.  That is, birdshit can be an open field poem (a piece of art) and the arbitrary and random movement of birdshit resonates with the creative processes of composing an open-field poem.  Of particular relevance here is Charles Olson's influential manifesto "Projective Verse" in which he proposes an "OPEN" form of composition or "COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, overall form, what is the "old" base of the non-projective" and stresses the importance of the syllable, the "king" of composition ( 614-615).  Olson is a recurring "figure" and influence in Minter's poetry. For example, the "his" in the second line of "*Melody*" is Olson and the first line refers to Olson's *The Maximus Poems*  (Butterick 1985) (Minter, Email to Author. 19 June 2000): "*My wife     my car     my color     and      myself* / - there is always this measurement, his medium" (39).  The poem seems to suggest that Olson and his importance to poetry "will turn up again" (39).  Given this Olsonian influence it is not surprising that Minter (re)introduces embodiment to poetry for Olson is renowned for his reconnection of "poetry with the body" (Hoover 3).  Briefly, Olson's projective verse  "reorients meter to the breathing of the poet in the act of composition and places sound before sense in the construction of the phrase. The projective poem took on a sprawling appearance on the page as it attempted to transpose (project) the flow and mingling of words in the poet's mind onto paper" (Christensen).  While the formal characteristics of the "Empty Texas" series resonate with the appearance of a projective poem, Olson's organic creative processes seem less relevant to Minter's random search of dictionaries and libraries and the composition of a poem presented as falling guano.  Similarly, the emphasis on the *poet's* body is less relevant to Minter's poetry than an embodied sense of subjectivity.

In conjunction with the issue of the placement of mobile subjectivity in environmental contexts are the contexts presented by other mobile subjects. That is, mobile subjectivity involves connection between subjects. In *"Forgetfulness"* the speaking 'I' of the poem becomes still (the poem commences "The stiller I became") and he/she feels the 'you' of the poem through "that Intense, Overall"

> Vibration you're close by, writing and, perhaps (it is
> more accurate to say
> radiating outward and limitless (51).

Mobile subjectivity is about subjects moving from place to place, and being moved from place to place, but more importantly it involves an awareness of embodiment. Like the dancing man of *"Gravity"* whose desire for another subject is presented by his attempt to preserve the *touch* – the embodied experience – of his lover's hand, the subject of *"Forgetfulness"* tunes into the other subject by feeling/sensing/opening him/herself to the embodied experience of the other subject. However, these moments of engagement with mobile subjectivity in the "Empty Texas" series are rare. Predominantly this series is preoccupied with playfully criticising Language poetries' lyric 'I' rather than developing or attending to the concerns of mobile subjecting.

## *'Morning, Hyphen' and Mobile Subjectivity: Possibilities for Postmodern Subjectivity*

It is not until the *Morning, Hyphen* series that Minter fully engages with mobile subjectivity. In this series issues that are important to mobile subjectivity include: time and movement; the movement of the body through time, space, and place; and the relationship of moving bodies to each other. The poem begins ironically with "From beginning" (playing on the Biblical 'In the Beginning'), but this is not 'The beginning' but beginning as a verb, as an

action or movement. Similarly but in reverse, "your beautiful rush / Against surface" is not "rush" as a (normative) verb but rush as a noun which includes movement. Repetition is used as a poetic device and it is also a subject of the poem in the form of memory and recollection, forgetting and loss ("Names, we forget them, /ghost fingers lost between / hyphenated vertebrae"). Bodies repeat each other as they move amongst each other: "your lips contact repeat contact"; "A series of foaming, the/ division of foaming. I feel the border of your body arrested in/ mine. I repeat the border of your body arrested". All of these issues are components of the investigation of the mobile subject.

These issues are linked by an emphasis of sense. Reflecting Minter's concern with the placement of subjectivity, a subject ponders: "I am redistributed, thus: / what I do not know yet, but sense". The subject admits to a lack of knowledge about how he or she is being placed or organised, but rather than presenting this as an impossible dilemma the poem provides an optimistic alternative. That is, mobile subjects do not have to be victims of how society organises them because they have the ability to "sense" what is in process. *Morning, Hyphen* is a sensually charged series; composed of bodies touching, "wanting, /complete exposure", "Of feeling / suspended and then / above this rush", "fingers lost between / hyphenated vertebrae", "lips contact". Movement in itself is less important than the contact and connections with other subjects created by movement: "I feel the border of your body arrested in / mine. I repeat the border of your body arrested". There is more than one mobile subject in *Morning, Hyphen*: "your beautiful rush", "Names, we forget them", "You said your lips", "your body", "Your index finger", "Between us", "we confide what traces of needing", "our coagulate excess", "We continue to / be here", "our enzymes' / gravitas", "Your face drowns", "where we / appear", "you said", "our determined / walk", "where

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your face does drift into loving partly", "the shadow our body makes out, on sand.  This / debris we wake", "you say", "your belly's to myth & symbolic / touch", "your voice".  With the explicit presence of "you", *Morning, Hyphen* focuses on the relatedness of mobile subjectivity and it is from this relation that a sense of optimism about mobile subjectivity is created.  The "courage of our moving" involves opening subjectivity to the knowledge available through the body.  Rather than attempting to escape the movement/organisation/placement of subjectivity, movement is embraced as the Rilkean epigraph suggests, "For staying is nowhere".  Rather than a critique of how subjectivity is manoeuvred the poem focuses on moving within a loving relationship or community.  This series can be read as embracing embodiment as a viable tool for mobile subjects as we move into the twenty-first century.


## *Conclusion*

Peter Minter's "Empty Texas" series simultaneously incorporates and criticises the poetics of American Language writing.   The influence and incorporation of the poetics of Language poetry is evident in Minter's conceptualisation of language as the constructive and constitutive force of society and subjectivity; the refutation of language as a 'natural' or transparent entity; and an understanding of meaning-making processes as contingent, marked by undecidability and multiplicity.  Like Language poetry, Minter's  postmodern aesthetic practices are dominated by intense self-reflexivity, unfamiliar stanza formation or an absence of stanzas, irregular line lengths, unconventional grammatical structures, peculiar syntax, ellipsis, non-sequiturs, metonymic and serial composition, obscure language, fragmented and arbitrary construction, non-linear or discontinuous narrative and thematic progress, and many other poetic techniques that have come to be defined as postmodern.

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While adopting similar poetic practices as those found in Language writing, Minter also critiques the poetics of Language poetry. In reaction against the ego-centred, authorial and autonomous subject or lyric 'I' as it is presented in 'Official Verse Culture', Language poets attempt to erase the poet's personal 'voice' from poetry. Minter's critique suggests that this approach is no longer relevant. Indeed, his poem *"Lust"* can be read as suggesting that the ego-centered 'I' of Language poets has been repressed and has now returned. However, unlike Modernist avant-garde movements which relied on the destruction of the poetics of those who came before them, Minter's critique recognises the shifts and changes in poetic practices as inevitable. This enables Minter to avoid hierarchically positioning his own poetics as more 'correct' than that of Language poetry's which in turn enables an understanding of Minter's post-Language poetics as a "mutation (gradual change as an articulation of difference), fusion (the synthesis of diverse attributes to produce a distinctly new quality), and renovation (reviving the castoffs and misfits of formerly threadbare poetics)" (Conte 11).

Minter's post-Language poetics is interested in what it means to be a subject living with the "informatics of domination" (Haraway 163) of the late twentieth-early-twenty-first centuries. In this digitalised world, subjects have become like bits of a system which can be infinitely moved and modified, arranged, and rearranged. The most profound example of this is the rearrangement of DNA in genetic engineering. Genetically modified foods are now commonplace on supermarket shelves, and yet the ramifications of these rearrangements remain a mystery. Similarly, genetic modification in the form of cloning has resulted in laboratory-produced animals. Recently it has been revealed that a laboratory has produced edible beef without the cattle and it is claimed it will be available for human consumption in

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the near future. In poetry this investigation involves attending to linguistic arrangement and how the arrangement and rearrangement of syntax, grammar, punctuation, lineation, spaces, functions in a poetic text. As Haraway suggests, an investigation of the "limits of language" is a form of postmodern politics appropriate for the end of the technologically dominated society. In relation to subjectivity, Minter's poetics is less concerned with the way subjects are dominated or controlled, moved, arranged and rearranged by the new technologies, than he is in affirming a way of *becoming in the world which makes use of mobility*. That is, Minter's concept of subjectivity is affected by the new technologies but rather than conceive subjectivity as trapped or dominated by these new technologies, mobile subjectivity is an empowering possibility. For Minter, mobile subjectivity is embodied subjectivity and mobility brings subjects together in embodied relationships. Perhaps Minter's fluid and harmonious lyricality is the most appropriate for his concept of mobile subjectivity: a subjectivity that is sensually embodied and connected in relation. Just as Language poets' investigation of the media-dominated society results in a use of language not that different from the media's use of language (Perloff, *Radical Artifice*), Minter's investigation of the technologically dominated society results in a concept of mobile subjectivity that embraces embodiment and fluidity, and is poetically presented in a lyrically harmonious and fluidly mobile language. Minter's poetics contributes to a positive postmodern ethics which imagines an empowered sense of mobile subjectivity and suggests that the way to live in the technologically dominated world is to move in embodied relation with each other.

Given the renewed emphasis on the role of language in postmodernity and in particular the constitutive power of language in relation to subjectivity, linguistically innovative poets interested in subjectivity can offer insight into some of the important considerations of the

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late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Poets like Minter and the other innovative, postmodern new nineties poets discussed in this thesis, engage with the relationship between language and subjectivity and what it means for subjectivity to be constructed by language. Despite the claim that postmodernism is nihilistic, the postmodern poetry of these poets is optimistic. As my discussion of Minter's poetry demonstrates, and as I shall discuss in the proceeding chapters, innovative new nineties poets work with language to present the possibilities and opportunities available for ways of thinking about subjectivity. It is the responsibility of poetry critics and their poetry criticism to offer ways of approaching these new cultural formations so as to draw attention to the possibilities being articulated. As Ann Vickery states, the history of Australian poetry criticism reveals predominantly negative responses to experimental and postmodern poetry and Raymond Williams argues that the unfamiliar or that which has not been "fully articulated" previously in art typically stimulates 'disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble' (qtd. in Vickery, "Beyond Strictly Verse and Pulp Diction" 126). Surprisingly, Minter's wild poetic innovations have not been 'blocked' nor have they motivated 'emotional trouble' as has been the case in some responses to Lew's and Mateer's poetry. I have suggested that Minter's conjugation of seductive lyricism and experimentalism have assisted this positive reception, but as is always the case there are various reasons for Minter's critical acceptance and they are not all related to the qualities of his poetry. However, despite the positive response to Minter's poetry there has been no thorough critical discussion. There have been reviews praising Minter's innovations but just what these innovations involve and how to approach these difficult and complex poems has not been attempted. Again the reasons for this lack of critical engagement are not solely related to poetry but as Martin Duwell argues, without thorough and thought provoking criticism, poetry like Minter's is in danger of becoming part of the

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"trackless desert" of Australian poetry and Australian culture is in danger of becoming a "mere buffoon in the family of nations" ("Unsung poetry falls on deaf ears").

# CHAPTER 2
# Embracing Embodiment: The Poetry of
# Alison Croggon and Rebecca Edwards

## Introduction

Embodiment is one of the predominant issues of Australia's new nineties poetries. Embodied poetry is concerned with subject matters which involve the body, such as pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, miscarriage, menstruation, sex and lovemaking, preparing food, eating food and multiple other activities. Throughout this chapter my use of the term 'embodiment' specifically refers to 'writing the body' as subject matter, as theme, as preoccupation and as a mode or form of poetic writing. For new nineties poets embodiment is a vital issue in the processes of subjectivity and their engagement with embodiment embraces the corporeality of postmodern subjectivity. In this chapter I focus on the poetry of Alison Croggon and Rebecca Edwards: two very different styles of poetry united by a poetics driven by embodiment. Both Croggon and Edwards write with and through the body to create poetry that challenges the concept of disembodied subjectivity and the fiction of disembodied writing and reading practices.

Embodiment is an issue of concern for many new nineties poets and there are embodied poems within almost every new collection. Those who are particularly focused on embodiment include Alison Croggon, Rebecca Edwards, MTC Cronin, Tracy Ryan, Melissa Curran, Morgan Yasbincek, Jordie Albiston, David Herkt, Jacinta Aboukhater, Jane Gibian, Gina Mercer and Marcella Polain. Following is a pastiche demonstrating the type of poetry I am referring to as embodied:

[B]ruising your skin
She slithers through the slit, translucent grey tentacles teasing her momma's lips Eyes
soft watering holes, ghost ponds, sad salty holes
Sour plum lips.  Octopus in her cunt
sailormoon softmoan pantyporn peepshow[1]

soft tan nipples
shooting between our fingers[2]
toss the dense muscled flesh free sprawling[3]

The moisture of my mouth
yet to evaporate[4]

tongue erasing frantic hammer
you eat me, the marvel
of your tongue's polish[5]

weave/ wave / weep / ween
world / work / wade / womb
tomb / tune / tooth / tool

textures / ruptures / gestures / centers
weeping / yielding / rising / reaching[6]

lungful & muscle resisting
the urge to burst upward[7]
kissing
the manymomentarymouth
of hot lava springs
lips dripping diving
into the wet bloody swollen tangles
sucking out stories

slide off my
tongue    down the back of my throat
          & fill my lungs/disappearing inside
my cracks   pulsing along the viscous velvet of muscle
                              swimming for the heart[8]

your blood in
my heart in your
body my blood

steeped in specific fluids   the strange
wines of intimacy  the scarlet gestalt
of a menstrual existence   slipstreams

in armpits   saliva between thighs
a still lace of sweat at a nape.  It seems
we trade with our tongues.  I recognize
love when I taste your flesh[9]

the angle of your face
          between my thighs –
                    the thousand notes
                              of your lucid tongue –
                                        the taut fruits
                    shivering to wakefulness
          against my lips

crying skin and coiling muscle churn
the turbid swill of passion thick with smell
of milk and seed and dung into the wet
unwounding dark[10]

wound in sweat we drink the
red dries on your chin you drink from
me I watch & hum & bleed beside
you    eat the air I
eat

the mountain of your knee
your track of spine
the deep white drift of flesh inside my thigh

my fingers trace each movement    step
(each jar of muscle against muscle against bone)
& clamber over all your ribs like ruts in unknown roads[11]

moving hand on her belly
    encircling the waste
  of an egg-white moon[12]

Embodied poems embrace bodies: tongues, skin, lips, eyes, cunts, fingers, muscles, flesh, mouths, wombs, teeth, lungs, throats, hearts, blood, armpits, saliva, thighs, sweat, necks, faces, chins, knees, spines, bones, ribs, bellies. I am invited to taste, drink, smell, sense, feel, touch words – to let words intimately and physically touch me, my skin, my mouth, my body.  Words perform a sensual dance as they kiss, foam, lick, dive, drip, ooze, swell, suck, slide all over the page/all over my body.

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As the pastiche reveals, women's bodies are boldly presented so that previously taboo words like 'cunt' emerge in a number of poems, as do 'tits' and other parts of the body. Unlike the fearful, "trapped" girl in Judith Wright's "Naked Girl and Mirror" poem of 1966, women confidently view the female body, as the subject in Tracey Ryan's "Hair" demonstrates:

> The length
> of my body is an odd
> nudity, what is it
> doing there, how
> did the hair
> get pared down
> to just
> these patches
> we cultivate
> like fetishes
> meant to excite (*Killing Delilah* 17).

She is curious, questioning and bodily aware. Women's sexuality is explicitly presented, as the first stanza of Alison Croggon's "Lines on Human Grace" reveals:

> how tenderly I tongue your arse
> embroidering your cock and balls and thighs
> with fleur-de-lys of breath and rosy kisses
> and bead your springing hair with pearls (*The Blue Gate* 20).

As the following poem by MTC Cronin exposes, previously taboo or ignored topics like women's orgasms are presented:

> The boy didn't have
> his finger in the right place
> and since then I don't know
> how many men have
> asked me
> how many times
> did I come (last section of "Surrealism & Damages (or "Did I Come?"), *The World Beyond the Fig* 47-48).

Australia's new nineties poets particularly embrace the body through the corporealities of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering. Jordie Albiston's "Uterus" writes the body of childbirth:

> I have no point   to make
> my womb is round    my
> logic circuitous    I ache
>
> in nervous arcs    One by
> one   the children come
> in a curve      out of my
>
> pear-shaped part   I tithe
> such lives in the belly
> of this church     I wreathe
>
> behind the Delphic door
> woven from female hair
> This sanctum is a store-
>
> house of unspoken words
> difficult languages under
> the tongue (*Nervous Arcs* 19).

MTC Cronin celebrates pregnancy:

> If anyone could have told me I'd
> feel like that, I could have dived
> to the bottom of the ocean with stars
> for eyes, could have grown like a
> tomato vine beneath the fence and
> into another man's yard, even, I
> think it's possible, I could have sung
> an opera on the path outside my
> life.  My own life.  And now I've got
> two: a big head and a small head
> and eyes, nose and ears in my
> stomach.  I put my hand over them
> but it doesn't get any more real ("Splitting in Two" *The World Beyond the Fig* 72)

and writes the body of breastfeeding:

> her hand on my breast, little crab, leading
> her mouth to feed there, eyes staring deep into
> my body, nose buried in my flesh – a single smell – the

first time I ever fell asleep as a meal . . . Dreaming of my taste ("Eternity; and a Single Thought, a Single Smell" *The World Beyond the Fig* 78).

Poem, after poem, after poem, embraces the body as a vital process of subjectivity.


## Different Modes: fluidity and urban chic

Predominantly, embodied poetry is fluid in its style or mode. Like the fluid styles of Hélène Cixous (1989, 1991, 1997) and Luce Irigaray's (1985) *écriture féminine*, embodied poetries are characterised by a dominance of assonance and consonance, excessiveness or proliferation, words and poetic devices that emphasise the physicality and materiality of language, and the sensuality of speaking such language. *Écriture féminine* is a fluid language of love and desire, according to Cixous:

> Writing and Loving are lovers and unfold only in each other's embrace, in seeking, in writing, in loving each other. Writing: making love to Love. Writing with love, loving with writing. Love opens up the body without which Writing becomes atrophied. For Love, the words become loved and read flesh, multiplied into all the bodies and texts that love bears and awaits from love. Text: not a detour, but the flesh at work in a labour of love. (*Coming to Writing and Other Essays* 42)

Born of a woman's body, the fluid style of *écriture féminine* is multiple:

> A woman's body with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor – once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. ("Laugh of the Medusa" 885)

However, fluid modalities are not the only ways poets embrace embodiment. *Sestet*, Five Islands Press' New Poets' series of chapbooks published in 1999, can be seen to implicitly demonstrate and comment on the different ways of writing embodied poetry by contrasting the poetries of Keri Glastonbury and Gina Mercer. Glastonbury's *Hygienic Lily* is the first collection in the anthology. Glastonbury's style of poetry is not fluid, and yet it is concerned with embodiment. For example, "Classified:" advertises, "My clit is a simple light fuse / in a

bulb of epidermal cells" (17), and "Pulp:" describes the love struck subject as "a citrus orange /plunged chest first" (16). Glastonbury's poem about the experience of orgasm and bodily pleasures, "Maschinenmensch:", demonstrates the matter of fact quality that accompanies and complements her urban mode:

> These days
> I orgasm in my urethra
>
> & recline
> comatose in the bath
> after work.
>
> I have a single bar radiator
> (*low-tech, electromagnetic*)
>
> & I'm sprung tight
> like that coil
>
> for all its agitation.
>
> & yet
> the subtle seepage of pleasure
> is as much my constituency. (15)

The second collection in the anthology, Gina Mercer's *The Ocean in the Kitchen*, provides a stark contrast with Glastonbury's urban embodied style of poetry. Mercer's poetry explicitly engages with poetic styles such as Glastonbury's, which Mercer appropriately terms "urban chic". The first poem opens the collection:

> Swimming the Sky
>
> *"see you've been writing nature poetry since you moved up north"*
>
> shit – got it wrong again
> should be doing urban chic
> all cool and monotone
> concrete and cats' piss – but …
>
> here
>
> banana fronds unfurl, swimming the sky
> in fluid grace, like schools of green stingray

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reef-dwelling clams are large robust vulvas
glitter-frilled, muscular mysterious
…
   maybe its my hormones, that essentialist mother-earth myth
               nature does impress
           makes me want to write
                 desire
                  live
…
   if i lived in a big city maybe i'd feel the same about the constant changing
      buildings going up and coming down and going up again
but i happen to live with bananas and casuarinas and guavas and poincianas
not to mention a few people constellations of birds and geckoes and spiders
             so i make
          culture with nature
            otherwise
     it might not be there next time
     the compost cycles round for renewal
and life without trees and babies and worms and clams
       won't be worth a cat's piss
     no matter how many cafes and monotones
     there might be left in our cities

   don't want to get into the city versus country bit
      but this desiring nature
          is not
washed out watercolour self-effacing hobbyist pale
          it is
  passionate as poincianas painting the town red
     rampant as peak-hour traffic
      muscular as city coffee
   robust as reef-dwelling clams (41-2).

In this poem Mercer aligns her fluid style with the natural environment. However, Glastonbury's "urban chic", as evidenced in "Classified:" and "Maschinenmensch:", is as much a part of the subject's 'nature', her bodily being, as is Mercer's. Thus, it is not correct to say that this fluid mode of poetry is more 'natural' than Glastonbury's urban mode, nor do these differences need to be understood within the hierarchy, natural/artificial. Such a critical approach could then claim that Mercer's, or the fluid mode, is superior to that of Glastonbury's or the urban mode. This is the judgmental process involved in Maiden's

review of *Sestet* in the *Australian Book Review:* Maiden perceives Glastonbury's mode as "stylised whimsy", while Mercer is compared to Patrick White because she is a "thorough artist" who is careful in her "sensuous" approach to subject matters (39).

Despite a predominance of this fluid mode in embodied poetries, Mercer's poem, "Away with Espalier", suggests that her fluid style is unfashionable today:

<div align="center">

Away with Espalier

there is a definite preference for the pared and spared and i know i can
do the thin and elegant and Barbie likes it and so does a d hope
is there space for luscious profuse lush sprawling pumpkin-vine fat strong rococo curls and lots of
tendrils lascivious repetitions
sensual sensuous sinuous phrases that wind around and around and round
your senses until you are dazed dizzy dreaming you are the poem and it is you
in a fertile smoke a tropico-humid haze of pleasing pleasurable sensations
as the words world tread finger lightly on your tender heatplump hips (49).

</div>

Mercer underestimates the predominance of her fluid poetic style, especially amongst women's poetries concerned with embodiment. While Glastonbury's "urban chic" is a style that has much more in common with the poetry of John Forbes, Ken Bolton, Joanne Burns, Gig Ryan and Ted Nielsen (all influences), poetries rarely concerned with 'writing the body', Glastonbury's poetry is innovative in its connection of this urban mode and embodiment.

## Terminology: Embodiment/the body

Throughout this chapter I use the term embodiment rather than 'the body' because the latter can be misleading as there is not one body but multiple bodies: bodies of different age, class, colour, gender, height, weight, capabilities. Theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, bell hooks, Margaret Homans, and Barbara Smith, reminds that much writing of the body is a writing of the white body. And Australia's new nineties poetries reflect this claim in that

most embodied poetry is written by white Australians.   I am aware then that my focus on embodiment may seem exclusive.  However, Indigenous poets are not the only new nineties poets excluded from this discussion.  That is, while embodied poetry is a major thread for many, it is not a major concern for all.  In some collections a reader will find only one or two poems attentive to 'writing the body' (Anita Heiss' "Pleasures of the Flesh" from *Token Koori* 31, Lauren Williams' "What Must It Be Like To Be The Man" *Invisible Tattoos* 31), while some reveal little interest (Dipti Saravanmutu, Emma Lew, Geraldine McKenzie, Wendy Jenkins, Coral Hull, Jean Kent, Hugh Tolhurst, Sarah Day).

## *The Postmodern Theoretical Context*

Embodied poetry emerges in conjunction with postmodernism's preoccupation with corporeality and matters of embodiment.  Within the academy 'body' books from all fields have emerged[13].  As Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price state, today it "is an academic truism that the body, after decades of perceived neglect, is once again at the forefront of academic discourse" in various fields (1).  Historically, interest in 'the body' has fluctuated, from either total disparagement in opposition to the 'high' life of the mind and soul (Synnott), relegated to the realm of biology (Turner), or examined for cultural meaning (Douglas 1966, 1982, Giddens).   This turn to embodiment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries can thus be understood as a *re*-turn to 'the body' and a *re*-thinking of embodiment (Shlidrick and Price 1).  One of the fundamental differences between previous notions of the body and this *re*-turn is that contemporary thinking seeks to subvert the Cartesian dualism which opposes mind to body, passion to reason, nature to culture, and the various other binaries that accompany these hierarchies.

However, desires to subvert the mind/body dichotomy have not been enough to disentangle the strangle hold of the mind/body split; the entrenchment of this dichotomy being so pervasive that subversive attempts are rarely successful. Vicki Kirby, in *Telling Flesh,* suggests that the "flesh and bone" of bodies continues to be excluded as the "stuff of essentialism" (72), and the "pervasive yet unpalatable belief that the anatomical body locates the unarguably real body, the literal body, the body whose immovable and immobilizing substance must be secured outside the discussion" continues as the dominant paradigm even in feminist writing that explicitly and consciously attempts this subversion (70). In her discussion of Jane Gallop's interpretation of Luce Irigaray's corporeal feminism Kirby suggests that Gallop "is careful never to" include the "oozings and pulsings that literally and figuratively make up the differential stuff of the body's extra-ordinary circuitry" (76). Due to "the political ramifications that derive from conflating essence with biology", Kirby suggests, "we repeat the problems on another register . . . [because] we remain obedient to this inside/outside schema" and repeat the patriarchal doctrine that there is indeed a "risk" involved in the "flesh and bone" of the body, and it should therefore be excluded (76).

Kirby finds that Gallop is able to avoid the risks of the flesh by conceiving of writing "as an activity whose effects are passively received and recorded upon a surface", reminding us that other feminists have pointed out this "model of a *tabula rasa* whose inert matter merely receives and then bears an inscription without in any way rewriting its significance" operates within the "sexual economy" of the "patriarchal thought [which deems] the body/woman, as that specular surface, [which] is routinely denied any efficacy in the reproduction of value" (77). This avoidance of the body is enabled by the "psychoanalytic explanatory narrative that traditionally posits the body before language. Psychoanalysis does not engage the

problematic of the body as always/already a field of language, but rather posits it as something that precedes and *then* enters the field of language" (77).

Kirby suggests that we need to rethink essentialism in a "return to the body", even though such returns are marked by risk and fear:

> Perhaps commerce with the body is considered risky business because the split between mind and body, the border across which interpretations of the body might be negotiated, just cannot be secured. This fear of being discovered unwittingly behind enemy lines, caught in the suffocating embrace of that carnal envelope, menaces all conciliatory efforts. (73)

Strategies and tactics form ways of continuing this bracketing of the body, as in the defense of Luce Irigaray's 'writing of the body' which is defined as figural rather than literal (73).

The way to avoid bracketing the body is to embrace it, as Kirby suggests: "Rather than take our distance from an originary essence, as if we could, we can acknowledge something of the process of essence becoming unmotivated" and the "curious result of this would be that we could embrace even biology, with all its entailments, within the scene of writing – not as a closed origin, its identity secure, but as an integral expression of the performativity of language" (98). The reason we must acknowledge the flesh and blood body is because "[t]o prohibit any mention of biology as inappropriate to critical theory, a stance that permeates much contemporary discourse in cultural studies, is a frightened reflex that only reinvests in the prescriptive determinisms" of relegating the body to the outside of thought (98). Kirby acknowledges the "extraordinary difficulty of this task and [suggests that] the ethical challenge of its undertaking involves learning how to pose such a question in the face of institutional demands that it remain unpresentable" (99).

To challenge the disavowal of embodiment by embracing corporeality is to disrupt the 'othering' processes that excludes subjects according to a phallocentric hierarchy which favours mind over body. As Kirby points out, acknowledging corporeality is an ethical challenge to the "phallocentricism that binds 'woman' and the general category of 'Otherness' to a beyond that is excluded from the scene of production" (99). Embracing embodiment is one of the "novel way[s]" (Bauman 4) of a postmodern ethics which calls into question an "identity politics" that others difference (Kirby 99). For new nineties poets embodiment is a source of creativity and empowerment: is vital to the processes of writing and subjectivity.

## *Deleuzian Concept of Embodiment*

Like Kirby, Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* suggests that feminists have not gone far enough in their working with 'the body': egalitarian feminists (Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Mary Wollstonecraft) conceptualise women's relationship with their body as a "unique means of access to knowledge and ways of living" (15) but on the other side of this are the limitations inherent in such a position, while feminists who conceptualise bodies as socially constructed (Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodorow, Marxist, and psychoanalytic feminists) see the body as "a biological object whose representation and functioning is political, socially marking male and female as distinct" (16). Both of these approaches are limited in their commitments to a

> biologically determined, fixed, and ahistorical notion of the body and retention of the mind/body dualism (even if mind cannot exist without body, the mind is regarded as a social, cultural, and historical object, a product of ideology, while the body remains naturalistic, precultural; bodies provide the base, the raw materials for the inculcation of and interpellation into ideology but are merely media of communication rather than the object or focus of ideological production/reproduction). (17)

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The approach to the body which Grosz advocates for the new millennium is a "*lived body*, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures" (18). In this thinking through the body, the body is "regarded as the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a raw, passive nature that is civilized, overlaid, polished by culture. The body is a cultural interweaving and production of nature" (18).

This thinking through the body connects with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Bodies in Deleuzian thought are forces, impulses, energies; a body is "not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the functions it fulfills" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 260). The "body without organs" is the intense body, throbbing and pulsing with the processes of desires. Brian Massumi explains:

> The infant is a supermolecular supple individual. Call it a "body": an endless weaving together of singular states, each of which is an integration of one or more impulses. Call each of the body's different vibratory regions a "zone of intensity." Look at the zone of intensity from the point of view of the actions it produces. From that perspective, call it an "organ." Look at it again from the point of view of the organ's favorite actions, and call it an "erogenous zone." Imagine the body in suspended animation: intensity = 0. Call that the "body without organs" (or BwO, as D & G like to write it). Think of the body without organs as the body outside and determinate state, poised for any action in its repertory; this is the body from the point of view of its potential, or virtuality. … Since the body is an open system, an infolding of impulses from an aleatory outside, all its potential singular states are determined by a fractal attractor. (70-71)

As evidenced in Massumi's description of Deleuzian thinking through the body, the language of physics is most effective in describing the molecular particles which make up the body. This enables an understanding of the body without boundaries, a body which Grosz's corporeal feminism makes use of:

> the body provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the

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private and the public, the self and other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition. (*Volatile Bodies* 20-21)

Grosz employs the Möbius strip model to show "that there can be relation between two "things" - mind and body – which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate "things" being related, they have the capacity to twist one into the other" (209-210). The Möbius strip is the "inverted three-dimensional figure eight", which enables Grosz to theorise the

> rethinking [of] the relations between body and mind. Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside. (xii)

Although Grosz explicitly borrows the model of the Möbius strip from Lacan (xii), the philosophical thinking that gives rise to the way Grosz employs the model is from her Deleuzian borrowings/adaptions (see "Intensities and Flows" in *Volatile Bodies,* "A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics" in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*; the title *Becomings*, edited by Grosz). Like Grosz, my corporeal feminism intensely spirals from/in Deleuzian theories of the body.

It is within this theoretical context that some of Australia's new poetries have become embodied. I am not implying that poetry follows theory, but in the 1990s the issue of embodiment is a shared focus of both theoretical and poetical engagement. In *Volatile Bodies* in 1994, Grosz claims that she cannot pre-empt "what the best terms are for representing women", their bodies, knowledges, and sexualities, because women are "now in the

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process" of formulating such terms and understandings of their "self-representations" (188). Indeed, as the poetry above demonstrates, women are creating poetry representing women's knowledges, sexualities, and bodies in ways that embrace the "flesh and bone", "oozings and pulsings" of embodied life.

### Embodied Poetry Criticism

Embodied poetries challenge poetry criticism to become more embodied. How does poetry criticism become embodied? As a starting point I suggest it is necessary to acknowledge what Catherine Waldby describes as the "fiction of the disembodied scholar" of criticism generally (17). Waldby reminds us that embodied criticism does not claim to be objective, nor bodiless, dispassionate nor disinterested (17-18); critics use an "explicit 'I'", "not as a naïve, experiential utterance, an expression of an authentic self, but as a formal and methodological innovation in the way academic texts can be written" (23). I envisage that writing embodied poetry criticism will "precipitate other textual effects, [because] to pull one thread out of the knot of disavowed masculine subjectivity which subtends the form of the 'proper' academic text" will unravel others with it (Waldby 24). Jane Tompkins, in "Me and My Shadow", talks about taking off the "straitjacket" of objective academic modes of writing (138), emphasising that this straitjacket performs a "distancing – making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other" (127). Writing embodied poetry criticism is not about "mere communication" but about conjugations and connections: "[i]ts power is not in dividing but in binding" (127). Like thinking through the body, which corporeal feminism advocates, embodied criticism acknowledges the "nontotalized series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, intensities, and durations", focusing on the interconnections and linkages bodies make with "other

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bodies, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate; … organs and biological process to material objects and social practices while refusing to subordinate the body to a unity and homogeneity provided either by the body's subordination to consciousness or to organic organization" (Grosz, "A Thousand Tiny Sexes" 193-194).

Embodied criticism attends to the experience of poetry. Martin Duwell advocates the importance of the "experience of poetry" when teaching students to write poetry criticism ("Unsung poetry falls on deaf ears" 45). As he suggests, this does not have to be seen as a "slide towards an essentialist, hermeneutically naïve, de-contextifying approach to literature, with a smattering of late-flowering and effete existentialism" (45). It is not a case of replacing 'one truth' (objective) with another (subjective). In considering the importance of the corporeal experience of poetry, we must remember that experience, like the body, cannot be thought of as some pure or uncontaminated realm. Iris Young reminds us that the

> discourse we use when we describe our experience is not more direct and unmediated than any other discourse; it is only discourse in a different mode. … Often people seem to assume that if we express our authentic experience, we will be free of ideology, but this is clearly not so: 'ideology operates…at the most immediate level of naïve experience' (Young 1990: 12, in Waldby 17).

Thus, I acknowledge that embodied criticism is as much an ideological position as objective analysis, and that it is one approach, position and possibility among many others. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that poetry critics disregard previous forms of criticism, but I am suggesting that embodied poetries implicitly question or challenge disembodied reading practices and can be productively understood through a conscious acknowledgement of embodied reading processes.

### *Removing the Straitjacket*

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So what might happen when the straitjacket is removed? Alison Croggon's "Divinations" (*The Blue Gate* 43-58) is a powerful poem that seems to require an embodied response. How could embodied poetry criticism respond? When I "open the blue gate / in the wall of stone / and pass through the dense / birdhaunted forest // the rhododendron drops its scarlet tongues / through the dark heavy perfume / of rotting earth" (50), I become immersed in "orchards of hair and sweat" mesmerised "with dapple and beehum" (43), bombarded with "birds, lungs, bricks, trees" (44), pulled into a swirling bleeding world of "frozen rubble" (45), "a cold sky" (49), "a sunless garden" (51), and "icy waters" (53). Questions upon questions bruise and burn (48):

> who was the wolf who paced the bedroom scarlet tongued and ruffed with hunger?
> who was the child which fell into the riddling cabbages?
> who was the mouth which steamed a duff of lies in the fuzzy nights?
> who was the word which stamped and stamped until all thoughts were footprints?
> (52)

stamping their loss in my skin, my blood, my face, my mouth. Lost in words that wrap their absence around my tongue, aching with a sad loss felt in words that loosen stones from my eyes, lips, fingers, hearing "children with voices of water" (51) lost.

"Divinations" is a sad journey of loss and anguish, yet there is an unbearable beauty that I return to again and again - a "monstrous" beauty of entwined lovers, pressing "their cheeks / one against the other / skin bruising and dissolving" (44) until each of us is kissed by words, kissing words, sucking words until they bend in the light, "inhabit the light" "prise into bloom your promise" (51) my promise a promise of speechless language and "brief unknowable beauty" (53). Your words leave me exhausted yet exhilarated. I know not why, yet I know my body has been spoken to, words have brushed against my skin, swept through me more powerfully than a hurricane. "Divinations" speaks to me, touches me with words

of love and loss, of an unborn child  whose "death is written" in blood (54) in words.  I know/feel this poem - it has an imperceptible force.  It is a force that is no less real than the wind blowing the butterflies outside my window.  I see neither.  "Divinations" opens different emotions, thoughts, perceptions – how can I tell you of them?  How can I tell you what they do to me?  I want to share these other sensations so I search language words sentences so as to touch you with the touches I have felt.

I have read other poems about miscarriage: poems by Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Barbara Giles, Janet Garrick, Gloria Foreman, Judith Wright and many others.  It is a subject that has been "portrayed by poets since the 17th century" (Anselment 1).  Yet I have experienced few poems like "Divinations".  Some reviewers' comments resonate with my experience, such as Michelle Mee's comment that "[r]eading Alison Croggon's *The Blue Gate* is a joyful, painful, intense experience" (34), and, as Beverly Braune suggests, you feel you know the world of Croggon's poetry "from inside out with the flesh peeled back" (241).

### How might an embodied poetry criticism function?

By attending to embodied and sexy poetry, poetry criticism can create a conjugative relationship between the frequently ignored art form of poetry and more popular art forms, like performance arts.  In becoming embodied and 'sexy', poetry can be seen as moving simultaneously with other art forms.  The ABC's *Late Night Live* summarised their program, "Poetry in Motion" (an interview with Peter Minter, Kate Lilley and John Tranter, 2000), with the following disclamation: "[d]espite the sexiness of the multimedia and the visual arts, poetry in Australia is thriving".  This statement implies that poetry is not sexy and remains 'other' in relation to more popular art forms.  In contrast, I believe it is more productive and

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accurate to focus on the similarities between poetry and other art forms, especially their shared embodiment and sexiness.  Poetry criticism can focus on the conjunctions between poetry and other art forms so as to contextualise poetry in the broader field of the arts and emphasise the 'au courant' position of contemporary poetry within an artistic culture.

While attending some of the opening performances at the Brisbane Powerhouse (2000), I was struck by the emphasis on embodiment in many of the acts and the Powerhouse's program successfully seduces and entices the public to attend the performances by way of this emphasis.  For example, Donna Jackson's performance of *Car Maintenance, Explosives and Love* is described as a "sensual world of lubricated nipples, throbbing eight-cylinder engines and ultra buffed ducco  …  glam rock, acrobatics and automotive lust" (Events Program).  Amanda Owen's *Body-Celebration of the Machine* is said to be a performance of

> Hormone racing humour, erotic acrobatic rawness, multi-media anatomy lessons, a human organ puppet show and the story of excreta told through interpretive dance. Amanda Owens  …  employs the external workings of the body to demonstrate and celebrate the inner operations.  …  to tell the story of our bodies – those living, feeling, vulnerable, pleasure-seeking machines that we all have in common.  … [This performance] will leave you thinking differently about your own body-machine. (Events Program)

Vulcana Women's Circus is described as using "circus skills to examine body image issues affecting young women: Are they body terrorists or victims?  Are they subjugated beneath unreal media images or are they reinventing the feminine as a powerful site of resistance and power?" (Events Program).   Watching Vulcana Women's Circus performer, Emma Aitchison, resonated with the poetry I was reading.  In her performance, known as 'tissue work', Aitchison sensually winds her body around the 'tissue' or cloth which hangs from the ceiling so that the boundaries between body and tissue become blurred in a process of becoming-body/becoming-tissue.  Similarly, the language of poetry sensually winds itself

around the reader of sexually embodied poetry, as Mercer's poem, "Away with Espalier",
emphasises: "sensual sensuous sinuous phrases that wind around and around and round /
your senses until you are dazed dizzy dreaming you are the poem and it is you" (49). To
assist this conjugation of poetry and circus performance, poetry criticism can draw upon
criticism of other art forms to attend to the way poetry, like performance art, "suggestively
performs, rather than 'represents' or 'presents'" (Jones 201). Amelia Jones' criticism states
that performance artists "perform and solicit and project the experience of an embodied and
open-ended femininity in such a way as to encourage the experiencing subject to interrogate
her or his own structures of selfhood and otherness, subjectivity and objectivity, masculinity
and femininity" (210). Performance art in the nineties

> is not simply visual (as this sensory experience is conventionally and restrictively
> understood) but also tangible and experiential: it stages and is about the
> interdependence of all of the senses and the continual state of suspension that
> characterizes our attempt to find meaning in things or in the actions and identities of
> other subjects (210).

Incorporating this critical approach, poetry criticism can attend to the ways words on a page
are likewise performative rather than representative.

I suggest that one of the ways new nineties poetries are involved in processes similar to
those of performance art is through an extreme and intense focus on the materiality of
language. Poems about sexuality use language to perform sexuality through what Deleuze
suggests is a "parallelism between body and language, or rather … a reflection of one in the
other" (1990, 280). Here, language imitates bodies when the "force of poetry [is] constituted
in the clash and copulation of words" (286). Morgan Yasbincek's poem, "Body Language",
explores the poetics of such a practice:

> here
>             no

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here
                                                    this wordless space

               between                         these words
               a vibration should touch

               meet
                                                              no
               lower
               at the finger point
                                        of cervix

               vapours smoke through organs
               ignite at solar plexus condense at the image
               trickle to hand to paper
               to here

                                   where we are another language
                                   sensation and partiality (*Night Reversing* 14).

The spatial positioning of words on the page and the subject of these words reflect each

other to perform the space where bodies and language interconnect, to form, as Yasbincek's

poem says "another language".


In Deleuze's work on Klossowski, he theorises what he defines as "bodies-language" (1990,

280-301) which involves "an astonishing parallelism between body and language, or rather

on a reflection of one in the other" (280).  Discussing Klossowski's "sexual descriptions",

Deleuze comments that they "function" in a way that is "no longer a question of speaking *of*

bodies such as they are prior to, or outside of, language, they *form*, on the contrary, with

words a 'glorious body'" (emphasis added, 281).  While Deleuze is specifically interested in

the obscene and the perverse (in this particular text), his bodies-language theorises a

threshold that I believe the excessively embodied poetries transgress.  "Bodies-language"

involves the "mutual reflection" of bodies in language and language in bodies and "the act of

language which fabricates a body for the mind" which "is the act by which language

transcends itself as it reflects a body" (281).  The relationship between bodies and language draws on an "entire pantomime, internal to language, as a discourse or a story within the body.  If gestures speak, it is first of all because words mimic gestures" (286).  Embodied poetry/language has the potential to unleash the becoming-language of the body and the becoming-body of language, where the "mind grasps the body, and the gestures of the body" (289).

The becoming-body of language creates a seductive sensuality that winds its way through and over the reader's body.  Alison Croggon's poem "Cuneiforms" is an example of what I am proposing here:

> the wet cry flourishing
> and crumpled wings
>
> burning
> in the new air
>
> ***
>
> you, other
> skin, unguessable
>
> shape of my embrace,
> a blue sail swelling,
>
> vanishing, your familiar
> hull heaving clear
>
> of the dazzle of our
> common sea (*The Blue Gate* 27).

Deleuze's theories of bodies-language comes from his analysis of Klossowski's novels, and an analysis of narrative is central to his discussion.  However, in the new nineties poetries it is those that are less concerned with narrative which set into motion the becoming-body of language.  As Louis Armand's poem "The Lighthouse at X" articulates, "description reveals

nothing" (*Seances* 25).    In these poetries it seems that narrative relies on too many superfluous words, whereas only words that 'clash and copulate', and words that are tasty to the tongue, enable these becomings; meaning is not constructed through narrative, but through the experience of language's becomings.    The difference can be demonstrated through the following poetry lines of Keri Glastonbury: "I've got my blonde girlfriend / fingering me discreetly under the jacket on my lap / As I look from face to face / blankly suspecting men who may have their radars / out for this type of thing" ("Shinkansen" 25); and Alison Croggon, "cunning lips, split / by your knowing / flesh-music, carnal / staves of labour" ("Cuneiforms" *The Blue Gate* 27).    While Glastonbury's poem narrates a sexual experience utilising narrative as its vital poetic device, Croggon's poem eschews narrative, utilising the materiality of language as the pivotal poetic device so as to *perform* the erotics of language.    (I am not implying that narrative is 'essentially' unable to perform an erotics of language, for a detailed discussion see Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation.*)

Another approach to embodied criticism, and attending to the relations between performance arts and poetry, can be produced by attending to the interactive role of readers or audiences.    As Amelia Jones emphasises, it is the interactive mode of nineties art that carries the potential of "breaking down the distancing effect of modernist practice", so that "the potential to eroticize the interpretive relation" between art and art criticism cannot be disavowed (5).    Embodied poetries' emphasis on its experiential and performative dimensions challenges poetry criticism to find appropriate ways to discuss this vital quality. The performative elements of the essays in *Sexy Bodies* offer useful approaches for poetry criticism.    As Grosz suggests, rather than a descriptive writing mode, the essays are involved in processes of "*production*": "the wager is to constitute activities as sexual rather than merely

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to reflect on a pre-established and already valorized notion of sexuality and its attendant support, the body" (ix).  To attend to the performative dimensions of embodied poetry, criticism can explore the way language works in the reading processes.  Dianne Chisholm's chapter in *Sexy Bodies* does exactly this in her embodied reading practice which she terms "cunning lingua" (19-41).  Chisholm's embodied criticism focuses on the experience of reading, beginning the chapter with "Reading Mary Fallon's *Working Hot* (1989) affects me erotically, moves me bodily, makes me hot" (19).  Chisholm attends to the mode of performative writing which moves the reader to become aroused.  In her obvious pun on the performance of cunnilingus Chisholm focuses on the performance of this practice on the reader/critic: "Lingual performativity engages the body of speech, the organ of speech-making which 'talks' in ways/in words which speak most directly to that other organ at the core of woman's sexual body.  Tonguing language so as to s(t)imulate cunnilingus, cunning lingua performs the sex that it speaks" (23).  (The practice of embodied poetry criticism need not be focused on only one form of experience, such as sexuality.)  Part of Chisholm's critical approach utilises Deleuze's theory of "bodies-language" so as to explore the way Fallon's poetic novel works.  Chisholm creates the term "cunning lingua" to describe the writing and reading practice involved in "bodies-language".  Focusing on female sexuality, Chisholm focuses on female sexuality, so as to "effect a radical displacement of the sexual code which, according to Robert Scholes, dominates modern western literature as a textual prescription for clitoridectomy" (23).  However, new nineties poetries are not always specific to female sexuality.  For example, David Herkt's tellingly entitled *The Body of Man* focuses on homosexuality:

                    Locked
        into this circle of desire
                my own want
        is mirrored

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in his male flesh
          & I reflect his own. ("ALBUM" 94)

The poem's performative language entices readers into the "circle of desire": "[r]olling" with words parting "thighs for him" as "I watch / across" the page "as want widens" in flesh of words in the "Hard-held" curve of hands "rubbing" "curving" "kissing" tossing in "the over-arching air / between us" between lines words grasp

          With lips lingering
               & wet between my own
          his tongue has blurred
                         distinctions
               & merges with
          my mouth. ("ALBUM" 93)

Herkt writes the body of homosexual erotics in a sensually fluid language or "bodies language", as Deleuze describes it.


Reviews by poet/critics of the same generation (as the poets), emphasise this shift towards sexual embodiment and the performative mode of poetry. For example, Tracy Ryan's review of MTC Cronin's *Everything Holy*, in *Poetry Review* emphasises that Cronin is "unafraid to mine the corporeal for its subtlest as well as its grosser meanings – no mind/body split diminishes this poetry. Serious she may be, even deadly serious, but nonetheless sensual" (100). Michelle Mee, in *Australia Women's Book Review*, focuses on the performative aspect of Alison Croggon's second collection, *The Blue Gate*, suggesting that reading this collection "is a joyful, painful, intense experience. It is written with something more substantial than ink, perhaps clotted blood, such is the bright colour and shock of the poems" (34). Mee suggests that Croggon's "are erotic poems, writing of tracery on skin, giving frisson to the mind. A pleasure to be reading them, as the words are printed on flesh, on bone, on brain" (35). Like Mee, Zan Ross' *Five Bells* review of Jordie Albiston's first collection, *Nervous Arcs*, elaborates

and celebrates the whole experience of reading sexy poetry.  Before even getting inside (the poetry), she draws our attention to the seductive cover: "The physicality of the book is alluring … the front cover [is] provoking".  From identifying the book as an object of desire, Ross moves into the poetry, building on this critical discourse of sexuality so as to celebrate what Albiston's poetry has to offer: "the opportunity to think, to enter the discourse, be surprised by language, to be opened profoundly"; "In short, this is a collection I intend to enter again and again, squeeze, roll all over, sniff, savour, turn into a companion" (6).  Like my readings of embodied poetry in this chapter, these reviews demonstrate that the "interactive formation" which Jones discusses in relation to performance art, occurs between the reader and the poetry.

Not all critics have enjoyed their experience of embodied poetry.  For instance, established Australian poet Alan Gould finds Croggon's "Divinations' problematic because of its "*strangeness*" and lack of "*common sense*" (*Quadrant* 83), and Adam Aitken's review in the *Australian's Review of Books* ignores the experience of Croggon's poetry even though he acknowledges her embodied mode: "Her language hugs close to sensuality and eroticism. It's as if she has treated the white page of the skin: a permeable site of interchange between ourselves and the realm of the animate and inanimate matter" (26-27).  This particular review is important because Aitken compares Croggon's poetry with two other new nineties collections, Emma Lew's *The Wild Reply* and Coral Hull's *How Do Detectives Make Love?*.  In the review Aitken's critical framework involves discerning which collection is the most "political" and which is the most "traditional".  He begins the review with the statement: "Of these poets, Alison Croggon is the most self-consciously analytical and philosophical, almost old-fashioned; Coral Hull is the most political, a poet with a mission.  Emma Lew's

approach is the least traditional and probably the hardest to grasp; there is little desire to define identity, or use poetry as a vehicle for social protest" (26). Even though Croggon's "idea of self" is defined through "the body" in a language that is charged with "sensuality and eroticism" Aitken reveals nothing of his experience of such language nor does he concede that such an approach in poetry is political. While I would suggest that Hull's poetry is the most "traditional" in its political approach because it belongs to a tradition of political protest poetry, and Croggon's is political in its feminist approach, Aitken ignores the political implications of Croggon's embodied and feminist poetry. The ready-made-grids Aitken brings to Croggon's poetry are his own expectations of poetry which are also the type of politics found in his poetry. That is, Aiken's poetry is politically motivated by what is broadly known today as an orthodox politics, "multiculturalism" (Aitken, "Reflecting a Culture of Convergence" 46). And even though this term is hardly adequate to describe a form of politics, it does reflect the political motivations Aitken's poetry struggles with in connecting his ancestry/cultures: his Thai (mother) and his Australian (father). Multiculturalism is perceived as one of the most important and worthy forms of politics, thus poetry that engages with this form of politics is equally important and has high cultural capital within the contemporary poetry milieu. It is not a coincidence that the established critics on the back cover of Aitken's third collection (one of the few marketing spaces for poetry) emphasise this aspect in authoritative statements:

> I regard Adam Aitken as one of the most accomplished of the younger generation of poets. His technical control, of tone and image and voice is very striking; but what I most value in his poetry is its sense of the possibilities of a hybrid culture.
> Ivor Indyk

> . . . knows language holds cultural riddles and explores his own.
> Tom Shapcott, *The Age*

> …read this poet now, in the relatively early stages of a career that will not only last, but also flourish and influence the discourse of others who, like him, are subverting and rewriting the 'empire of signs.'
>
> J.A. Wainwright, *Antipodes*

Certainly, rewriting the empire's language is a valuable and worthy form of politics, but it is not the only worthy form. Croggon's poetry can be perceived as political in its transgression of language, as Deleuze states of bodies-language "there is a double transgression – of language by the flesh and of the flesh by language" (286). Croggon's is an embodied language that cries the churning "coiling muscle" and the "turbid swill of passion thick with smell / of milk and seed and dung", where words secrete "purple sea-born flesh" ("Lines on Human Grace" 20); an embodied language singing that which has been excluded from language and poetry.

Another reason Aitken's review does not engage with his experience of reading Croggon's poetry, is because he felt he lacked an appropriate critical language with which to discuss the poetry (Online posting to Poetryetc. 3 Dec. 1999). When I questioned Adam further about this, he replied:

> It's not surprising how personal reactions to a book become public documents ie. the reviewer's reaction is taken as an "objective" judgment of a book's worth. I wanted to review the book in a more personal way, which takes too much print space for such a publication as the *ABR*. ("Re: Fw: What does 'long' mean?/musical structure." Email to Author. 10 Dec. 1999.)

Among other things, Aitken shared his experience of reading *The Blue Gate* with me: "I certainly felt "emptied" by the end of the book, which for me at the time of reading was an uncomfortable feeling". Aitken also "felt a sense of tiredness" that he suggested was partly derived from the "endless" repetitions of Croggon's poetry and partly related to his personal world ("Re: Fw: What does 'long' mean?/musical structure." Email to Author. 10 Dec. 1999). In reply I suggested that perhaps because the collection ends with an intense poem of

loss, a poem about miscarriage, readers could come away feeling 'emptied'. Aitken replied: "Interesting you mention the poem about miscarriage. It was an experience I went through with my present partner and I think it's still a very taboo subject for poetry. Good that Alison writes about it" ("Re: Fw: What does 'long' mean?/musical structure." Email to Author. 14 Dec. 1999). It appears that Aitken did not realise that "Divinations" (the last series in the collection) was about miscarriage (as is "Nights"), and I suggested that reading this poem with the experience of miscarriage/loss so close could be one reason why he felt "emptied" but rather than exploring his response he had to write an objective response in the form of a poetry review. Yet unlike my desire to embrace embodied writing practices, Aitken commented that he felt "happier to be excluded [from the "feminine text"/world] somewhat – like the would-be father not watching the birth" ("Re: Fwd: What does 'long' mean/musical structure." Email to Author. 14 Dec. 1999). It seems that for Aitken taking off the straitjacket would bring him too close to the experience of the poem and the discomfort that involved. Taking off the straitjacket can be uncomfortable because it is risky, and it involves entering an unfamiliar space, or in Aitken's case a space that is uncomfortable because it is too familiar. For me it can be equally uncomfortable not to remove the jacket, so I plunge into the space hoping that beyond the shining surface, in amongst the swirls, that initial discomfort will open to an exciting space where new thoughts, emotions, feelings and perceptions are possible.

Another reason Croggon's poetry can cause discomfort for some readers is because of its difficult postmodern aesthetics. Croggon's embodied poetry is often anti-referential or abstract, and the formal arrangement of "Divinations" is part of the poem's abstract quality. "Divinations" is in eleven parts and spans sixteen pages. Readers cannot rely on the form of

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"Divinations" to direct their meaning making processes: the poem lacks a linear narrative and thematic development is spasmodic. Order is unimportant to "Divinations". Section 11 suggests that the poem is 'about' miscarriage:

> I listened for you in the throat of summer, in the fanfare
> of trees I lingered and spelt their shadows
>
> you rose out of my darkest soundings, inaudible fish
> eyelessly twirling in warm currents
>
> autumn cauled your arrival, tracking my veins with weariness
> and floated you out on sad leaves of blood  (53).

In summer the pregnant woman awaits the arrival of her unborn baby but in autumn the sign of blood brings the sad news of the baby's death. Yet the final section (15) does not conclude a narrative nor progress thematically:

> Even the sun
> may not return
> to eyes risen
> for its blessing
>
> and this vine
> winding our bones
> rustles ceaselessly
> in absent winds (58).

This arbitrary order of the poem is exemplified in the way Croggon has altered the order of "Divinations" since it was published. Croggon has changed the sequence a number of times since it was published in this (second) collection; she has changed words, lines, order, and arrangement. "Divinations" becomes four separate poems as 1-15 are divided and re-arranged: in "Divinations 1" the published 10 becomes 1, "Divinations 2" commences with what was 3, "Divinations 3" commences with 7, while "Divinations 4" commences with 4. These alterations suggest that the order of the fifteen pieces that form the sequence of the published version is not necessarily a reliable feature or guide for the reading process of the published version of "Divinations". This formal property is one of the reasons I initially

found myself in unfamiliar territory when reading "Divinations". No doubt I could cleverly develop a critical reading that does demonstrate the way the poem is thematically cohesive, but such an approach risks 'capturing' the poem with my cleverness rather than attending to the intensive and immanent reading processes.

Without a linear narrative or thematic progression, the critical question becomes, 'how does the poem work formally or what does the reading process involve?' I suggest that "Divinations" works not as a sequence but as a series. In his book, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry,* Joseph Conte discusses the way a series differs from a sequence:

> The series is distinct from the neoromantic sequence because its discontinuity and radical incompleteness are at odds with the latter's basis in an organic theory of continuity and development . (15)

> The series distinguishes itself from the neoromantic sequence principally because it forgoes the linear, thematic development of that form. (20)

Whereas a sequence is a "hypotactic structure (meaning "arranged one under another") whose elements are subordinate to or dependent on other elements for their meaning", the series is a "paratactic structure (meaning "arranged side by side") whose elements, although related by the fact of their contiguity, are nevertheless autonomous" (22). Perhaps it is this "side by side" arrangement that troubles Alan Gould's reading of the poem. He questions the combinations of the words "absent winds" in section 15, asking "A vine rustling in *absent* winds? Is that "absent" as in absent-minded or as in absent? The adjective is careless of clarity" (83). Perhaps so, for a reader who looks for "*common* sense" (as Gould does), but the series does not work this way. The series works syntagmatically. Drawing on Roland Barthes' discussion of the "syntagmatic imagination", Conte points out that the syntagmatic imagination "no longer sees the sign in terms of its 'depth' (or symbolic) relation, but in terms of its antecedent or consequent links, the bridges it extends to other signs" (20). In

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the context of "Divinations", the word "absent" is a bridge between all that has been lost. A vine that winds itself around our bones is a vine of ancestry or a family tree. In this poem it is an absent wind because the family tree is full of those who are absent or deceased. In other sections an unborn child has been lost, the pregnant woman has miscarried, and these absent winds are interconnected to the lost child of other sections because this absent child belongs to the vine of the family tree. Although neither the absent winds nor the lost child depend upon each other in the structure of the poem (and therefore can be said not to make "common sense"), they are interconnected because as Conte states of the series "each part resonates in the time of the whole in the reader's mind" (55). However, it is less likely that this will occur if readers do not leave their ready-made grids at the gate.

The last section of the poem is not "densely metaphorical" as Gould claims, for it functions metonymically: the absent winds are not metaphors for the lost child, they are the lost child or deceased family members who continue to affect the living through memory or otherwise. As Conte points out:

> The discourse of the serial is in a metonymic mode. The series expresses its structure as a set of tangencies. Each contiguous part (or metonym) on the poetic line, aware of its antecedent and consequent links, implies a contextual whole. But the intersection of these contexts will be small, and frequently they will meet only at discrete points. (23)

The series works by combining "whole classes of dissimilar but related signs" in such a way that all sections of the poem are "interrelated" and each has the "ability to *substitute*" one section for any other, thus the serial form is an "ahierarchical structure". In section 15 the dissimilar but related sign is the absent wind which substitutes for the lost child of the miscarriage.

In "Divinations" dissimilar images are combined, and what Conte describes as the "*combinatory* axis of language, establishing chains, networks, "jigsaws" of meaning" (55) is in process. Section 10 is characterised by its aleatory manner of combinations which is another aspect of the serial form. While Conte emphasises the poet's deliberate composition technique of chance, I do not believe that this is crucial to the reading process. Whether the dissimilar images of section 10 were combined in an aleatory manner by Alison Croggon or not, they certainly have that appearance. Here the postmodern fragment is exemplified, and how this fragmented section occurs is through the combination of dissimilar images such as a dog running, a child tugging his mother's skirt, rain, a bird, the moon, lips, fingers, a wolf pacing the bedroom, a child in the cabbages. Section 10 is an example of what Conte defines as a "limitless set of relations" (15), of discordant images, with the lack of punctuation complementing the chaotic process and creating a pace that is challenging for the reader to sustain.

Conte talks about the way the serial form is peculiar to postmodernism and how it is a form "acutely aware of what has generally been perceived as the lapse of governing orders in our existence" (17). He states that the serial form is "founded on attitudes toward chaos and order which are newly effective in the postmodern era. Chaos no longer evokes the terrifying disruption that a modernist" (18) poet conveyed and attempted to control. In "Divinations" chaos is an "*absence* of a determining order" (18) which the poet does not attempt to control via any predetermined order.

When I asked Alison Croggon about the structure of "Divinations" she said, "I remember I had the idea of the DNA molecule as a reference when I was first writing it: a spiral" ("Re:

Divinations and other questions." Email to Author. 31 Mar. 1999). This is very interesting because in his discussion of the serial form as a postmodern innovation that could not have happened at any other time, drawing on Umberto Eco's analysis of "contemporary science and artistic form", Conte states:

> No longer bound by the fixed, preordained orders of closure, the series articulates both the indeterminacy and the discontinuity that the scientist discovers in the subatomic world . . . The concept of the serial form could not be convincing without the "granular" physics of subatomic particles and molecular combination and recombination. Postmodern poets recognize such qualities not as elements of disorientation or a disruptive chaos, but as an essential aspect of their own investigation of contemporary existence. (19)

It is this last sentence which I think is vital to the differences between the modern sequence and the postmodern series.

While most of the reviews of Conte's *Unending Design* were positive, Peter Quatermain questions the validity of the claim that the series is an "*exclusively* postmodern" form. Quatermain believes that Conte "fails to see . . . Pound's *Cantos* [as] an almost perfect exemplar of serialism as he [Conte] defines it" (413). In an article published after *Unending Design* and after the reviews, Conte implicitly addresses Quatermain's criticism when he points out that one difference between the modern sequence and the postmodern series is the poet's intentions. Here Conte contrasts the American postmodern poet, Blaser, with Pound, stating: "One might contrast Blaser's hopeful pursuit to the despair of Ezra Pound when he found that he could not *make* his epic poem cohere" (38). While it may not always be possible to know the poet's intentions, in this case I do know that Alison Croggon does not intend for "Divinations" to be read as a unified piece as her alterations reveal. Furthermore, Alison and I have had discussions about the postmodern series and while she was consciously unaware of the particularities of the series, she agreed that "Divinations"

could be discussed as a series and she has no problem with distinguishing her poem as a series rather than a sequence ("Re: Divinations and other questions." Email to Author. 31 Mar. 1999).

I believe that there is another way of comprehending the poet's intentions without actually knowing the poet's intentions first hand, and I think this is what Conte is implying. If a poem suggests that fragmentation and multiplicity produce "disorientation or a disruptive chaos" then we may be able to assume that the poet or the poem is modernist. We could say this of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the ultimate exemplar of the modern fragment that finds living in the modern world a disruptive and disorientating experience. If the poem suggests that fragmentation and multiplicity are important aspects of its "investigation of contemporary existence" then we could say the poem or poet is postmodern (and this can be regardless of the subject matter). For example, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is steeped in pessimism about the fragmentation of the modern world and can be understood by its desires for unity and a non-acceptance of fragmentation, thus demonstrating the "disorientation" and disruption caused by fragmentary chaos. In Croggon's "Divinations" there is not a celebration of fragmentation, but more of an "investigation of contemporary existence" which includes fragmentary chaos. Both *The Waste Land* and "Divinations" may be said to be 'about' experiences of fragmentation, but the experience of this fragmentation seems quite different in each poem. In Croggon's poetry there is less resistance to the experiences of living in a fragmented world, nor is there a nihilistic view of the world which can be overcome by returning to the past. Unlike Eliot's modernist belief that poetry could offer the 'knowing' reader salvation from the modern way of life and a return to the golden days, "Divinations" offers no promises, only processes of becomings as exemplified in

section 15 which concludes with neither celebration nor vilification, but something in between which is open to the possibilities created by an "investigation of contemporary existence". Rather than reading according to a framework of common sense, Croggon's embodied series challenges critics to embrace embodiment in all its complexities.

If Australia's new nineties poetries can be understood as moving simultaneously with other art forms and with critical literacies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, then these poetries challenge poetry critics to move with them in becoming sensitive to the erotics of language, and their corporeal responses to reading such poetry. As Amelia Jones' study of performance art emphasises, the experiential and interactive mode "unhinge[s] the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in the formalist model of art evaluation" (5), so that the "Kantian mode of "disinterested" analysis" is subverted (3). Through their embodied poetry Australia's new nineties poets challenge critics who attempt objective and disembodied reading practices.

## *Mothering: A Source of Embodiment in Alison Croggon's Poetics*

Alison Croggon's embodied poetry is born of her poetics of embodiment which ruptures the "traditional gendered separation of creativity and procreativity" (Bartlett 160) by connecting writing poetry with childbirth and mothering. Croggon states that she "started writing poetry seriously" when she became a mother and while she had always written poetry and had always "thought of it seriously", with the birth of her first child "it became a necessary question" ("Re: Writing as a proper job." Online Posting to Poetryetc. 15 Oct. 2000). Croggon does not assume that this is the case for all writers, but she is conscious of the way it has been excluded from the discussion of poetry.

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> I know I had an extraordinary strong feeling that this event [having a child], which was not only the most profound in my own life but in the lives of most other people, was a topic actively sneered at – by women as well as men. (I never got through Paglia's Sexual Personae, throwing the book across the room at about page 21, because of her claims that certain bodily functions – I think shitting and having babies – had never produced great literature.)
>
> I don't think childbirth has exclusive tickets on it – any more than death or love, other common and profound human experiences. But it's had more trouble getting any press, being exclusively performed by women. ("Re: having babies and poetry." Online Posting to Poetryetc. 19 Sept. 1998)

Women have written numerous 'mothering poems', like Audre Lorde's "Now That I am Forever With Child" (1997), Muriel Rukeyser's "Nine Poems for the Unborn Child" (1978), Marie Ponsot's "Multipara: Gravida V" (2002), Alicia Ostriker's "Birthday Suite" (1999), Eavan Boland's "The Journey" and "Night Feed" (1995). There are the anthologies *Motherlode* (Holt and Lynch 1996) and *Mothersongs* (Gilbert, Gubar and O'Hehir 1995) and American scholar, D'Arcy Randall, is writing a dissertation which is an "overview of maternal poetry in America during the second half of the 20th Century" ("Re: D'Arcy Randall's dissertation on Mothering poems." Online Posting to Wom-Po. 14 July 1999). There have been poets who have felt that motherhood was not complementary to writing. Gwen Harwood's famous poem, "Burning Sappho", commences with the disruption motherhood causes for the writer:

> The clothes are washed, the house is clean.
> I find my pen and start to write.
> Something like hatred forks between
> my child and me. She kicks her good
> new well-selected toys with spite
>
> …
>
> The child is fed, and sleeps. The dishes
> are washed, the clothes are ironed and aired.
> I take my pen. (29)

Adrienne Rich similarly perceived mothering and poetry as incompatible: "For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (31). Perhaps for some women the conditions Rich and Harwood wrote about have changed, thus in the 1990s women poets more often connect motherhood and writing poetry.

Further comments of Croggon's suggest the relationship is not entirely unambiguous for even in the 1990s having children emphasised her gender and the way gender operates as a limitation for women in our society. In an interview with John Kinsella, Croggon replies to the question, "How central is gender to a poetics?":

> I didn't hit the idea that writing poetry as a woman was problematic until relatively late, when I was in my early 20s. I was at first surprised by the idea, but after I had children I began to see the point of feminism. I found the idea of a female poetic initially empowering, but I discarded it pretty soon because I found that ultimately it took away from me a kind of natural right to poetry itself. (*Salt* 69)

Croggon obviously felt that being a woman and a mother could negatively affect her as a poet, but the embracement of "a female poetic" did not offer her a way out of this bind. Instead she denied empowering the premise on which the bind is constructed, that is, that women because they are female have no right to write poetry. Because of this she has been able to make a space for herself as a poet, a 'room of her own', right next door to her children (she has three).

To interconnect the 'scene of writing' and 'the body' Croggon creates connections between childbirth and the labour of poiesis, as in "Limbo":

> I am waiting
> for what emerges
> from the white edges
> of catastrophe
>
> that last bleeding note

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bearing
this fragment
in my body
is a joy
beyond the dark
strength of my heart

and yet I choose
this labour

harder
every time *(The Blue Gate* 30).

In one of the earlier manuscripts of *Navigatio* Croggon writes explicitly on this connection:

Too close an analogy between the child and the act of writing is not tenable without
trivialising both. But to be whole, a poetic must retrieve for us the unanaesthetised
reality of birth. (77)

This 'unanaesthetised reality' can be restored through interconnections with children because

alienation arises from being exiled from childhood.

There were two big sea voyages during my childhood – from South Africa to
England and then, three years later, out here. I was seven when I arrived in
Australia. Seven is a very interesting age – it's when children suddenly develop very
rapidly and take their first real steps towards adulthood, the age when they start to
lose their baby teeth. I suppose that sense of complete dislocation at that age has
determined much that followed in my life.

It's certainly given me a very dislocated sense of language and place, . . . Stravinsky,
who spent most of his life in exile, said his country was music, and I suppose there's
a real sense in which I feel that about writing – although I guess my question is, exile
from where? Childhood? (*Salt* 2001 70)

In "Notes" children do restore this childhood: "they restore me to many / things I lost: a

stone trough filled with miniature flowers, the /privacy of nests in bamboo thickets, a tiny

lawn always filled with / the voices of books, a blue gate" (*The Blue Gate* 38).

In Croggon's poetry childbirth, mothering and children are intense forces creating

transformations. Childbirth is a transforming experience that leaves the mother asking,

"who has given birth? and who is born?" ("Bearing" *The Blue Gate* 28).  Children teach us to give and "expect nothing" ("Notes" *The Blue Gate* 38), to change from being slaves of time so as to perceive time as "a bird / piping its promise on the edges of sleep" ("Divinations" *The Blue Gate* 51).  Children open ourselves to ourselves, as in *Navigatio* where the mother is able to see her body for what it is rather than for what she has been conditioned to believe:

> When my daughter was a very new baby, I had a bath with her.  She lay on my breast and I looked at her naked body.  I had never seen another cunt before.  Sometimes I had examined mine with the aid of a mirror, but what I saw, if it did not disgust me, seemed ugly.  When I looked at my daughter, I saw she was a pearl, a flower, a pure syntax of symmetrical beauty.  Before then I had never believed my lover's words: they were made in the heat of ardour, pretty compliments to cover an ugliness, politenesses which did not reflect what I knew to be true. (73)

In Croggon's poetry a child is potentially what Deleuze and Guattari call the "Body-without-Organs" (BwO) because a child "causes intensities to pass" which creates a potential "opening [of] the body to connections" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 153, 160).

> The BwO is a childhood block, a becoming, the opposite of a childhood memory.  It is not the child "before" the adult, or the mother "before" the child: it is the strict contemporaneousness of the adult, of the adult and the child, their map of comparative densities and intensities, and all of the variations on that map. (164)

Children are important, less because they restore a lost childhood, than their emitted transformative forces.  We "may contrast a *childhood block,* or a becoming-child, with the *childhood memory*: 'a' molecular child is produced . . . 'a' child coexists with us, in a zone of proximity or a block of becoming, on a line of deterritorialization that carries us both off" (294).  A child has the potential to deterritorialise our anaesthetised reality, to transform it into an unanesthetised reality which is a transformation of the way we think, feel, and perceive the world and ourselves and others:

> And what is a child?  Its anarchy challenges the world's closed possibilities: are faeces so filthy? is urine so disgusting? is the milk-engorged breast so distasteful?  what is a nakedness that is neither shameful nor shameless? and isn't it this unorderedness, this unabashed carnality, the unevolved origin of authentic sensation – that is to say, aesthetics? (*Navigatio* 94)

Croggon's poetics resonates with Sontag's suggestion that we have become anaesthetised – our sensory faculties have been 'dulled' – and "[w]hat is important now is to recover our senses" (Sontag 13-14). Croggon's poetics suggests that a child can do this and poetry strives to perform a similar transformation.

The language of poetry moves towards becoming a BwO which, paradoxically for Croggon, is without speech because a child "has no speech". Thus poetry or "[o]ur language is a bitter struggle towards the child's speechlessness" (*The Blue Gate* 10). In "Bearing" the child is "languageless" (*The Blue Gate* 28), in "Sonata" the almond tree's promise cannot be heard because it is a "language without speech" and the "rain is merciful, it asks nothing / and answers nothing, it is the voice of silence / forgiving our perplexity" (*The Blue Gate* 41), in "Elegy for Children" the child is "born / to the innocence that signals a reprieve / from knowing, an absolute possibility" (7), in "Ultrasound" the child has a "nameless face" and "its black mouth [is] innocent / of words", "without thought" and "beneath language" (2).

To create a BwO, poetry moves towards a language of silence without 'being' silent (an empty BwO), and it does so by connecting with a different language, the language of the unanaesthetised reality which involves embodiment, the "breath" of a child ("Notes" *The Blue Gate* 38). In "Sonata" the "language without speech" is spoken by the almond blossom, which "to any who will listen" is a language that "is always / sap burning through limbs that seemed dead, / urging the pitiless breath", and the rain's "voice of silence", like the children's in "Notes", is a language that "asks nothing" but forgives (41). Croggon's poetry luxuriates in 'bodies-language' of "dripping black, / viscous yellows, white / crumbles of honey, / weep, knowing death, / is dry and first voice / is water" ("Cuneiforms" *The Blue*

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*Gate* 26), which is made possible by a "return to the muck of glands and skin and breath"

(Online posting to Poetryetc. 10 Nov. 2000).

In Croggon's poetry the intense force that deterritorialises our anaesthetised reality is love.

Love, and poetry, move into a different economy from that of capitalism. It is the other

economy that Cixous writes of in "Laugh of the Medusa":

> she gives. She doesn't "know" what she's giving, she doesn't measure it; she gives,
> though, neither a counterfeit impression nor something she hasn't got. She gives
> more, with no assurance that she'll get back even some unexpected profit from what
> she puts out. She gives that there may be life, thought, transformation. This is an
> "economy" that can no longer be put in economic terms. Wherever she loves, all the
> old concepts of management are left behind. (361)

In Croggon's poetry we can enter this different economy and speak/write a different

language if we listen to "the breath" of the child which loves without expecting anything in

return (*The Blue Gate* 38). Cixous and Croggon share the desire to restore language to an

unanesthetised reality, to the "first music of the voice of love" which comes from the pre-

linguistic phase, the "time before law, before the symbolic took one's breath away" (Cixous,

"Sorties", 111). The way to perform such a movement and create a BwO is through love:

"Whenever someone makes love, really makes love, that person constitutes a body without

organs" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 30). 'Really' making love creates and partakes of an economy

that is other to the capitalist economy which confines "a body's transformational potential .

. . to its buying power" (Massumi 137). Poetry lives within this economy because "poetry is

nothing if it is not a making of love" (*Navigatio* 96). Writing poetry is an occupation, it is

work, but it is a type of work outside the capitalist economy. Croggon quotes Alice Walker

to emphasise this connection: "Work is love made visible" ("Re: writing as a proper job."

Online posting to Poetryetc. 15 Oct. 2000).

In Croggon's poetry the subjective positions of mother and poet entwine in a poetics which

flows from the interconnected relationship between childbirth and the labour of poiesis. As

a 'mother' and a 'poet' Croggon's 'labours' are both labours of love which open life and

language to the "unanaesthetised reality of birth" (Croggon, manuscript of *Navigatio* 77).

This "unanaesthetised reality of birth" offers *other* processes of subjectivity; other ways of

being or becoming in the world. In this space subjectivity can be free of pre-programmed

ways of being, thinking, living; there is the potential of a "reprieve" ("Elegy for Children")

from the 'numb' or 'dull' way of being a subject in the world. Croggon's third collection,

*Attempts at Being* (2002) – a title that eloquently captures the processural nature of

'becomings' and the non-attainment of Being – continues her focus on the difficulty of

becoming free of our anaesthetised reality:

> . . . . each morning
> might seem heavier, but it's how
> images flicker past you faster and faster
> without touching, that drills you
> coreless, insubstantial. You have to reach
> further inside, through deeper skins:
> the animal curls up, refuses
> your call: and then nothing.
> But still you hear its breath, a bristle
> of shock, walking unwarily
> on a lightless road or perhaps in the sudden
> gesture of a leaf.  ("Child's Play" 3)

For the numbed subject, the fast life flickers past like a film on the screen; the anaesthetised

subject's senses are so dulled, life cannot be felt. Subjectivity is hollowed into an existence

that has neither substance nor importance; subjectivity is here neither living nor loving.

Embodiment ("reach /further inside, through deeper skins") offers a way to create the

processes of becomings and hence a way out of this empty existence. Like Croggon's other

collections, embodiment is interconnected to an "unevolved origin" (*Navigatio* 94), which in

this poem is both animal and child. Here the resistance to wake from an anaesthetised

reality is emphasised ("the animal curls up, refuses / your call: and then nothing"), but the possibilities are there in the frequently unnoticed or ignored forces of life ("breath" and the "sudden / gesture of a leaf") for as the poem makes clear in the following lines, "What matters most is least". These minor forces are not imbued with God-like healing powers as this line tellingly concludes, "and that / refuses us shelter". Becomings do not lead to an all-powerful sense of oneself or one's subjectivity; on the contrary, becomings recognise "How slight we are". The poem concludes with various attempts at being:

> So the Word
> muscles in to save us, warping to false order
> the desperate ignorance on which we stand
> our vanities, only to crumble
> on the cusp of speech.
> Music might be us, deeply,
> but we can't bear it: our instruments
> are too crude. We have
> our hands, our lips, our eyes. Nothing.
> Each other? Only what is released
> briefly into lit arms. If we could hold
> the dream of play and vanish
> in the shimmer of that
> blinding stream. (4)

The "Word" of religion produces subjectivities based on lies, desperation, ignorance, and vanity, hence it will not unleash potential becomings. In contrast "language [which] infects us" is "one of our/few beauties". Music has the potential but its powerful sublimity is beyond our grasp. "Nothing" is not a comment on the force of "our hands, our lips, our eyes", for it is a source in itself. "Nothing" is not 'no thing' because "[w]hat matters most is least". The poem asks if potential becomings will proceed from the solace of others. The reply is a careful and tentative 'yes'. For potential becomings to be created through each other we must recognise the ephemeral conditions of these connections: "released" suggests giving freely, while "briefly" warns of the fleeting duration of this giving; "lit arms" also

suggests an openness towards giving (light shining outwards rather than open arms waiting to receive). Concluding the poem is the desired way of becomings or the preferred path of attempts at being. Here we see that the title is seriously ironic: child's play is the way to unleash becomings but it is not an easy task (child's play) to maintain the desire for play or even engage in play. Embracing the dream of play unleashes becomings, but far from a reification of subjectivity the desired result is a vanishing of subjecting. The poem concludes with the possibility of becoming imperceptible: if we embrace ("hold") the desire (dream) "of play" we "could" "vanish" in the space of play which is portrayed as a powerful force ("stream"). Croggon's vanishing subject can be understood within the framework of Deleuze and Guattari's theories of 'becoming imperceptible'. As Brian Massumi states, "BECOMING-IMPERCEPTIBLE is the process [of becoming] taken to its highest" force (193). "Child's play" concludes with a desired space where subjectivity can become. Importantly this place is not a place (like a church or heaven) it is a *space of intensity, of forces, of movement*, of "shimmer" and "stream". Croggon's desired space of subjectivity resonates with Deleuzian theories of becomings where "[m]ovement has an essential relation to the imperceptible" and movement is becomings: "Movement, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception" (Deleuze 1987 280-281). The "highest" force for Croggon's sense of subjectivity does not strive for an all knowing 'I'; on the contrary, this is a sense of subjectivity that "destroys identity as such" (Massumi 193), for

> What matters most is least, and that
> refuses us shelter. How slight we are,
> wrens running on a skin of rubbish
> over a dark river: but still distinct, like actors
> costumed as kings. A kiss will do
> in lieu of meaning, its violent
> unselving which tumbles us out (4).

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Embodiment ("kiss") will destroy reified identities, like "kings", with its "unselving" force.

Croggon's embodied poetry challenges poetry criticism that shies away from the deeply felt experiential dimension of poetry and a common sense approach which looks for linear narratives and logical meanings. To engage with Croggon's embodied poetry on its terms, to write immanent and thus appropriate poetry criticism, the challenge of embodiment is to embrace it. My experience of writing with Croggon's poetry in the mode of a critical practice that embraces embodiment has revealed that an embodied approach is productive of elucidation and creatively satisfying.

### *The Body in Pain: the Embodied Poetics of Rebecca Edwards*

> The pain of birthing labor likewise represents the manifold pains to which human flesh is heir. (Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* 214)

Like Croggon's, Rebecca Edwards' poetry embraces embodiment 'within the scene of writing' through the experiences of childbirth and mothering. However, an important difference arises because Edwards' poetry is born of violence and pain. Violence is the ink of her poems, written from the body and on the body; these are poems where kisses contain teeth, and not "just the tip of the tongue" but its "bloody veined root" ("Dark Poems" 51). Violence enters Edwards' poetry in a variety of experiences and contexts, including abortion, miscarriage, domestic violence (34, 82), children's cruelty (3), suicide (37) and sex (38). "Birth of the Minotaur in a Public Ward" is one of the most powerful and violent childbirth poems I have ever read, and in many ways the other poems in this collection resonate out from this sequence. Paola Bilbrough's *Meanjin* review of Jennifer Maiden's *Mines* suggests that Maiden's poetry is confrontational because she explores subjects that are traditionally

thought of as "literary taboos" (225). In comparison to Rebecca Edwards' poetry, however, Maiden's appears meek (this is a common difference between many poets of the seventies and the nineties). Many readers may find Edwards' poetry discomforting as she confronts us with scenes of childbirth:

> "Say goodbye to dignity"
> the doctor, ramming his rubber hand into me
> fiddling the valves.
> . . .
> before this day congeals to summer's meaty dark
> my blood will brown on floor and bed and gowns
> I will obscenely rut and suck the vinyl bag
> . . .
> Before this creamy, bloody, blue-faced thing
> tears through the dusk
> commanded by my body's frightful will
> I will have thrust beyond the conscious act (17).

Edwards is aware that her poetry may be too disturbing for some readers and she addresses readers directly: "You might say I'm feeding off this matter, that my mouth introduces / more filth than my stomach can carry off. / You might say I look down, I look in, that I follow too closely /the wriggling traces in slabs of bark and skin. / Cover it over you say. Come out into the light, look up at the sky" (87). But the sky, like the body, is "torn" and when something as elemental to living as the body, the air we breath and the land we walk, has been violently scarred and thus changed, Edwards' poetry tells us that it should not be "covered over".

I am one reader who does not want poetry to cover over the body, whether it be the body in pain or the body in love, I want the body in all its complexity. Yes, the experience of reading *Scar Country*, is discomforting, at times painfully sad, but I desire poetry that grabs me intensely with either its exploration of pain or love or whatever, rather than poetry that limps along in a world of mediocrity where feelings and experiences are ignored. Yet at the time

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of writing on Edwards' poetry my body hinders my progress. What a strange coincidence to find myself engaging with *Scar Country* while my body aches with its own pain of premenstrual trauma and anguish. Could an objective writing position, one that denies my body, be more comfortable than the vulnerability created by the removal of the straitjacket? Perhaps the answer to this is 'yes', because it could provide an escape from confrontation and vulnerability; it is a way of covering up the body. However, to write disembodied criticism, to deny my body, while engaging with a collection of poetry that works so diligently towards uncovering the covered body would be inappropriate and certainly not immanent to the poetry. Rather than denying the embodied experience of reading Edwards' poetry I accept *Scar Country's* challenges and perhaps will find these challenges transformed into opportunities even when the experiences are painful rather than celebratory.

Another writer who inspires me to use my premenstrual trauma in a positive way is Sylvia Plath. In "'Dawn Poems in Blood': Sylvia Plath and PMS" Catherine Thompson's "biochemical" approach to understanding the embodied creative processes of Plath's poetry suggests that writing while suffering premenstrual trauma can be productive of strong writing. Plath, like myself, suffered the severe symptoms of physical illness, such as sinusitis, fatigue and depression, in the luteal phase (the second half) of the menstrual cycle. Thompson traces Plath's menstrual cycle through her journals, mapping the two weeks of premenstrual symptoms and the "sudden change" of mood and illness with the arrival of menses (8). Unlike the accusations of 'mad woman' of traditional psychoanalytic readings of Plath's poetry (Holbrook, Buell, Quinn, Bassnett) Thompson reads those poems written in the luteal phase as "significant" for their "unity of tone and the way Plath uses language to capture the jagged rhythms of her psychic state" (15). Plath's premenstrual aggression

creates poems that "seethe with venom, suppressed aggression and the kind of spiraling thought patterns experienced by women with PMS" (15). Plath was able to do as the psychoanalysist, Julia Kristeva, suggests of those suffering depression: she was able to use her depression, invert and transform the negative into something positive ("A Question of Subjectivity" 133). Inspired by poets such as Plath and Edwards who have transformed pain into poetry, I attempt to transform my premenstrual trauma into something positive by writing through the body. While I am not sure I agree with Kristeva's claim that writing is a "powerful anti-depressant" (133), it does keep me from my bed which I wish to curl into so as to hide from the world.

My body is numbed by premenstrual depression. I need words I can eat, suck and chew - words that will caress me into feeling new sensations and perceptions. Edwards employs a variety of poetic devices in *Scar Country:* many of the poems have narrative structures to guide the reader, others use repetition ("Not Gethsemane", "I'll Tell You"), but those I connect with most in body are those, like Croggon's, that rely on the materiality of language. Of these I include: "Say It: Shell", "Sea Change", "Moonboat", "Eating the Experience: A Reminder", "Shadow", "My Dress", "Scar Country", "Birth of the Minatour in a Public Ward" and "Sea Change". These poems offer me an experiential reading process.

> But I don't mean 'experience' in the sense of a picture/image/representation that is calling back to an already constituted experience. Rather, language itself constitutes experiences at every moment (in reading and otherwise). Experience, then, is not tied into representation exclusively but is a separate 'perception' – like category. ( . . . as operating/projecting/composing activity.) The point is, then, that experience is a dimension necessarily built into language – that far from being avoidable, or a choice, it is a property. (Bernstein *Content's Dream* 676)

"Say It: Shell" - becoming a shell reader - "feel your lip & palate & tongue / wrap around a carapace of breath", taste "furling & unfurling its glossolalia" of language, feel the texture

"in the dimension of flesh / a lip, a gut, a foot / spiralling lime into secret chambers", lick the poem, "put it to your mouth", your ear, "hear it?"

> listen
> listen

to the sssibilance in "sea" in "whispered", "squeezed", "hissing", "slide" your tongue your fingers over words of pages of poems hearing seeing playing with the "shifts" of words, of pauses more solid than a full stop.


"Eating the Experience: A Reminder" – reminds me of the dangers, becoming trapped within my flesh my body becoming faceless, losing face - I will "have to fumble for it later / with big blind hands".  Be careful of the body, be careful not to "strap yourself" to hold too tight, clinging, alone,

<div align="center">lonely</div>

<div align="center">for the jump-rope shock<br>and the shriek</div>

of the "Shadow" watching, behind you to your side - watching.  Even though Edwards' poem "I'll Tell You" informs me that I "don't have to go through with it", writing is as necessary as eating even if

| It's | walking | on | | knives. |
| It's | beating on | the | door | that | has | no | handle |
| the | twisting | stair | and | the | | dust. |
| It's | being | dead | inside | your | | skin. (74) |

I push through my body through the red days and nights for to not write is a silence I am not prepared to accept, not for myself nor for the poets I write with/through.  At this moment my corporeal experiences of menstruation are important to my embodied writing practice, and Edwards' painful poems encourage this connection, but for Croggon and Edwards the corporeal experiences of childbirth are the most potent.

Childbirth is one of the most potent corporeal events to write through, as Croggon has commented, and Rebecca Edwards' sequence "Birth of the Minotaur in a Public Ward" explicitly addresses this interconnection. The first piece, "Induction", sees the child being born, the mother thrusting through the pain with every part of her body to bring the child into the world (17) and the second piece, "Birthmark", reflects this birthing process in the writing process:

> Today I wrote a poem
> with all my self.
> Every muscle, every nerve
> and every bone
>
> . . .
>
> I screamed a poem
> as my body burned around me (18).

Giving birth to words/poetry is bodily painful: "I don't want to pull these black worms out of me. It hurts. / The white page nags like a headache" (51). Yet, like the pain of childbirth, the pain of writing is an experience that has the potential to transform negatives into positives; to transform that which is annihilating and destructive into what Deleuze and Guattari describe as lines of flight, which are dimensions in our life/writing that open to the potentiality of life and writing. Deleuze's Nietzschean borrowings suggests that those who create these lines of flight from negative forces are opening life and writing to the "eternal joy of becoming" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 174-175).

If becomings are the processes of desire, opening life and writing to desire is essential. In Edwards' poetry the body has been "exiled from desire", the self is "exiled from that country" (cunt/body). In her poetry the body is a scarred body which is referred to as a

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"sore" (34, 82) and the self has become the "prisoner of bone" (66). One way to understand where this pain comes from is Edwards' experience of childbirth. In our correspondence (Letter to Author, 1999) Rebecca has told me how when she gave birth to her daughter she tore her labia, clitoris and vagina, which was then "stitched" up by the obstetrician. Section three of "Birth of the Minotaur in a Public Ward" deals with this subject: "Scalpels snicker, in their metal tray. / *Let 'er rip, your grandpa said, and so you did.* / A surgeon is stitching you back / to your shadow / matron sponges your blood" (19). The bodily result of this already painful experience was equally painful – the "complete loss of sexual feeling". It is for this reason that Edwards writes of the body "exiled from desire . . . I press home the prisoner of bone I have become, tears are few in the place where / I feast on rock, . . . I can no more kiss / than if my lips were beak" (66).

Edwards' poetry suggests that pain opens the body to an animal realm where lips become a bird's "beak". In our correspondence Edwards discusses the creative processes born of the corporeal experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in terms of an expression or a release of the "animal tongue", because for her pregnancy and childbirth were an "entirely animal form of creation". During the "extreme pain of labour" Edwards writes of the way her brain "literally switched off" and thus the realm of the animal most effectively expresses the "essence of this experience" (Letter to Author, 1999). Edwards' embodied poems fully engage the "animal tongue" of her corporeal experiences and unleash Deleuzian forms of 'becoming-animal'.

The becoming-animal processes of Edwards' poetry are various: becoming-horse - a woman in childbirth screams the agony of Picasso's Guernica horses; becoming-sheep - she pushes

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her "head into the nurse's breast and bleat[s]"; a monstrous becoming of a "huge bloodied beast" (20) in a "timeless dance" (17); and a becoming-bull – lunging for the "matador's mirror" (19). In "This Is the Love Poem" a becoming-dog thrashes the dog out of the persona: "at 3a.m. i was wild dog savaging my arms and hands" (34). While in "Crone Song" the voice of the poem desires to become-bird: "Raven, make yourself a nest at the top of my spine. / Use my sinews. / . . . / I need your blueblack feathers, raven / to shield me. / . . . /I need your beak, raven / and a tongue that will not be mistaken" (58). These becomings do "not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not 'really' become an animal" (Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* 238). Becoming-animal has nothing to do with filiation nor evolution but everything to do with "alliance" and "involution"; becoming-animal is "involutionary, involution is creative. To regress is to move in the direction of something less differentiated. But to involve is to form a block that runs its own line "between" the terms in play and beneath assignable relations" (238-239). Between a mother giving birth and a mad bull butting, passes the becoming-animal on the screams of the "two-headed" monster she has become. 'She will never be the same again.' Regardless of the doctor's control, she becomes-other, she is "consumed" (18) by her becoming, which is the only way to become. She does not "resemble" a bull; becomings are imperceptible, but they are no less real than the pain we cannot see but feel in the air.

An intensely sensual and embodied becoming-animal is performed in the poem "Sea Change *life cycle of the hunchback cowry*" (81). This poem blurs the voice of the person observing and fondling the cowry shell in a way that transforms the voice. The observer tells us:

> Sprawling inside a china fist
> she is a nude, forever ascending
> descending the spiral stair.
> Shyly, she laps herself

with her secretive tongue.

The observer touches the cowry shell: "I put my monkey's paw in / to touch her sleek, dark shell" but the observer must learn a different sensuality, a cowry shell sensuality because the touch makes the cowry shell close "her mantle up". Then the transformation begins:

> I must unfist myself, release her
> before the reef will let me go.
>
> She squeezes her eggpaste
> down the tube of my ear
> and grubfish grow there
> in my brain's flanged folds.

Not only does the voice of the poem "dream / of hunchbacks" she is transformed into something different and "That is why, in the x-rays / I am smiling" the smile of the cowry shell.

Much of these becoming-animals are related to the mythopoeisis of Edwards' poetry which engages myths so as to deterritorialise them and poetry. Edwards changes the rules of poetry by altering what is acceptable subject matter, and she rewrites the Greek myth of the Minotaur by changing it from half man/half bull to a female monster ("she cries" 21): she is a Minotaur born in a public hospital ward of a "two-headed" monster, she is a "creamy, bloody blue-faced thing" (17), and she is "some kind of thing with horns" (19). Here Edwards' is a writer like Haraway's cyborg writer who creates a "cyborg myth" through a construction of a "monstrous" self which uses the "tools" of a myth to subvert that myth for feminist purposes (175).

This feminist rewriting of myths is continued in Edwards' verse novel, *Holiday Coast Medusa* (2002). This is a long thirty-four part poem which uses the Greek myth of Medusa to tell the

story of Steph, a woman who is described on the back cover as "pregnant and fleeing along the Queensland coast in search of a relationship she can trust". Steph is fleeing a violent married man who is the father of her unchild and he has given her money for an abortion. Although the conclusion of the book does not explicitly depict Steph being killed by her male predator, the final sections suggest that this is the case. In section 32 Thene, a new-found friend Steph is hiding out with, hands Steph an envelope found under the door, the envelope is "marked *Steph*" and in large print it threatens:

> JUST GET IT DONE.
> ONE OF THE BOYS IS CHECKING UP ON YOU.
> . . .
> I OWN EVERYONE
> AND EVERYTHING
> IN THAT SHITTY LITTLE TOWN.
>
> ONE WEEK.
> ONE WEEK BEFORE YOU SEE MY
> MR NASTY MASK. (93)

In the following section Steph nostalgically yearns for a return to an idyllic childhood of shell searching on Shelly Beach (33). This is followed by the "Stupid girl" section in which Steph castigates herself for her behaviour:

> Why're you listening for his engine?
> Stupid. Stupid.
>
> Scribble something on the inside of your wrists,
> scribble: damaged goods
> faulty circuitry
> then hold out your arms
>
> Stupid girl.
> Stupid, stupid.
> Eat shit, my darling.
> Eat shit and die. (95)

Unlike Croggon's philosophical sense of subjectivity which engages with becoming-imperceptible in a positive way, Edwards' female subject is trapped by her invisible position

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in society. For Edwards, a molecular politics or ethics of becoming-imperceptible is less important than a politics of identity which draws attention to the unfair treatment of women in society.

The self-destructive and self-deprecating Steph is bound to her identity and for her the only release is death. Edward's rewrites the Medusa myth by changing the setting to a contemporary one, but she does not rewrite it to improve the role of the female subject. That is, Steph and Medusa are victims of unfair treatment and both are killed. *Holiday Coast Medusa* concludes with "The Old Story" in which Medusa is killed by Perseus:

> *Her arms are still clutching the painted wooden horse, as another*
> *mouth opens under her chin, as Perseus opens it for her, wider and*
> *wider, as the stone starts to scream*
>
> **Medusa!**
> **O Medusa!**
> **Medu –** (96).

Steph's death, like Medusa's, is not a process of becoming-imperceptible. *Holiday Coast Medusa,* like the poems of *Scar Country,* does not offer solutions to the reified subject position of 'woman'. Rather, Edwards' feminist politics draws attention to the reliance upon the reification of the subject position 'woman' which enables the *continuance* of the unfair treatment of women in society.

For Croggon and Edwards, pregnancy and childbirth are powerful corporeal experiences that have stimulated their embodied writing processes. As my embodied poetry criticism demonstrates, Croggon, Edwards and the new nineties poets discussed in the beginning of this chapter offer exciting challenges and creative possibilities for poetry criticism.

### endings for Ewan – 6.8.02

I hate writing conclusions; I find them terribly boring because the laws of composition state

that no new information should be introduced and everything already said should be neatly

summarised.

detour

this chapter has been missing a conclusion for many years now . . . . I have completed my

thesis and have only my references to 'tidy' and finish

as I re-read this chapter – Alison's miscarriage and Rebecca's painful birth stories resonate

with my life since writing with these beautiful women and their poems

my thesis writing was interrupted for some time   some pain and loss

two miscarriages

a baby boy we named Ewan died at 21 weeks gestation

I don't know how to transform the pain of that loss into an embodied poem   as I write tears

drench my keyboard    even after all this time    years    writing through that experience

remains painful

grief    remains

the doctor said 'what a nuisance'

no available explanation,    just 'try again'

and we did

and we lost another baby

'when you have had another miscarriage we will do more tests'

I don't want to have another miscarriage

I'm scared of loss                                                                of endings

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[3] Mercer, Gina. "Away with Espalier." *The Ocean in the Kitchen. Sestet: New Poets Series Six*. Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 1999, 50.

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[5] Minter, Peter. "Swallow", "*Odalisk*." *Empty Texas*. Sydney: Paper Bark Press, 1999, 21, 35.

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[9] Albiston, Jordie. "Marta Carta", "Eight Love Sonnets." *Nervous Arcs*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1995, 24, 94.

[10] Croggon, Alison. "Lines on Human Grace." *The Blue Gate*. North Fitzroy: Black Pepper, 1997, 20.

[11] Polain, Marcella. "cartography." *Dumbstruck*. Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 1996, 62.

[12] Cronin, MTC. "Need." *The World Beyond the Fig*. Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 1998, 76.

[13] *Thinking Bodies* (MacCannell); *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Braidotti); *Body and Flesh: a Philosophical Reader* (Welton); *The Body and the Self* (Bermudez, Marcel & Eilan); *Telling Flesh: the Substance of the Corporeal* (Kirby); *The Body Beautiful* (Healey); *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Butler); *The Body and The City* (Pile); *The Body and Social Theory* (Shilling); *The Body in Nursing* (Lawler); *The Body* (Atkinson); *Embodiment and Experience: the Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Csordas); *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality* (Horner & Keane); *Sexy Bodies: the Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (Grosz & Probyn); *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Grosz).

# CHAPTER 3
## Engaging Cultural Difference: John Mateer's
## Poetics of Hybridity

### Introduction

Issues pertaining to cultural difference are the preoccupying concern of John Mateer's poetry. Mateer was born in Roodepoort, a satellite city of Johannesburg in South Africa in 1971, he has lived in Australia since 1989, and his personal identity as a "pale South-African-Australian" as he has described himself (letter to the editor of *Australian Book Review*), informs his poetic investigation of a hybrid sense of subjectivity. Mateer's poetics ceaselessly engages with the connections and clashes of colliding cultures to focus on the ways subjectivity is constituted and constructed by these different cultures. Predominantly Mateer focuses on Indonesian, South African, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian cultures. The issues Mateer courageously tackles are the most complex and difficult issues of cultural difference and cultural relations. On a personal level Mateer's poetry asks the question: how can or does a white South African-Australian connect to the cultures, peoples, and the land that is not his by birth? The implications of this question are relevant to all those living in societies where various cultures live side by side and there are few societies where this is not the situation. Of particular importance is Mateer's poetic engagement with the cultures of Indigenous Australians and the political ramifications of this confrontation.

By the end of the twentieth century, engaging with different cultures and the mixing of different cultures has become a familiar and regular aspect of society. Whether defined as the post-colonial or postmodern condition, multiculturalism or globalisation, the separatism of the past has been replaced by the inclusion and hybridity of the present. In Australia,

cultural differences and issues of ethnicity have always been an important concern and as Australia's history demonstrates attitudes towards cultural differences have profoundly altered since the nineteenth century. From federation until the latter half of the twentieth century the White Australia policy sought to prevent as much cultural mixing as possible. It was not until the 1970s that 'multiculturalism' was adopted and policies of exclusion and segregation were overthrown in order to recognise and accommodate the increasing ethnic diversity of Australia. Due to the increasing number of refugees, the various processes and policies of reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, and the threat of terrorism, relationships between different cultures and races during the 1990s have continued to preoccupy Australians. Whether in conflict or harmony, the coming-together of different cultures and the existence of various mixes of cultures define the condition of society at the end of the twentieth century. This condition has been "interpreted as indicative of a new, possibly revolutionary quality, from which hitherto unheard-of perspectives emerge with regard to an understanding of the human condition" (Docker and Fischer 3). New nineties poets like Mateer and others engaged with the issues of cultural difference offer insight into these perspectives.

Issues of cultural difference are of particular importance to those new nineties poets whose ancestry is Indigenous to Australia, those who were not born in Australia, and those who were born in Australia but whose ancestry is not Australian. Like Mateer, who lives in Australia but was not born here, cultural issues are the concern of Ouyang Yu (China-Melbourne), Marcella Polain (Singapore-Perth, Armenian and Irish parents), Jacob G. Rosenberg (Poland, Melbourne), Louis De Paor (Ireland-Melbourne), and Lydia Cvetkovic (Yugoslavia-Brisbane). Issues of culture and cultural difference are vital to Indigenous poets

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Anita Heiss, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Samuel Wagan-Watson, Lisa Bellear, Romaine Moreton, John Muk Muk Burke, Michael J. Smith, John Graham and others. Issues of cultural difference are also important for Morgan Yasbincek (second-generation Australian of Croatian background) and Jemal Sharah (Lebanese and Irish background), poets who were born in Australia and whose ancestry is other than Anglo-Celtic.

Issues of cultural difference have always been at the forefront of the concerns of Australia's Indigenous poets and new nineties Indigenous poets are equally focused on this topic. Many new nineties Indigenous poets emphasise cultural difference by concentrating on the divisions betweens Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Much of Anita Heiss' poetry continues the tradition of protest poetry that is elemental to Indigenous art of the twentieth century:

> Proud to be Koori
> *In honour of Windradyne, a Wiradjuri Warrior*
>
> I am a Wiradjuri Koori
> Who has survived the shameful massacres,
> The continued injustice and murder of my people,
> And the destruction of a traditional, respectful way of life.
> I have survived the bitter battles and the
> Spilt blood of my ancestors
> That proved that we too are human.
> You measured our skulls though to see
> How intelligent we were.
> But you ignored the fact that
> We invented the boomerang –
>         the greatest aerodynamic invention ever.
> That's how smart we are!
>
> I am proud to be Koori and
> Fight the conspiracy of ignorance.
> I take pride in my heritage and culture
> And shun appropriating white vultures.
> I feel contempt for those who argue against native title legislation
> And those who are into racial vilification.

> Still, we have survived as a strong people
> Defying Darwin's theory, white superiority and dominance.
> And while policies of "protection" and "assimilation"
> Have been replaced with "self-determination" and "reconciliation" –
>     you still call the shots.
> And now because genocide didn't work
> You use your own definitions of who we are
>     to kill us off. (*Token Koori* 10)

Heiss reminds readers of the history of Australia and the crimes committed against Indigenous Australians by non-Indigenous Australians, and draws attention to the continuing crimes of appropriation and racism. In the following poem Heiss acknowledges the mix of non-Indigenous and Indigenous cultures that form her identity:

> I am a Wiradjuri woman
> Proud and strong.
> Raised in white institutions, made to get along.
> Socialised, educated, employed
> The white-man's way.
> These have shaped who I am today.
> But I never forget where I'm from,
> Or what ancestry runs through my veins.
>
> I am who I am.
> I am a bicultural blackfella
> And I apologise to no one.
> ("Bicultural Blackfella" *Token Koori* 7).

However, the non-Indigenous culture is characterised negatively as a controlling force and less worthy of admiration. For Heiss, relations between the different cultures of non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians cannot be reconciled:

> So you want to be my friend,
> Make peace with me now, after all this time.
>
> But you show no remorse for the wrongs done,
> Seeing compensation as your penance,
> Rather than my right.
>
> You want to reconcile but will never admit –
> That we were at war.
> The greatest undeclared war in history. ("Reconciliation #1" *Token Koori* 15)

Heiss' poetry can be aligned with the writings of Oodgeroo, Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis, described by Adam Shoemaker as "writing projects as political campaigns" and "revisions of the past, the anti-historical" ("Tracking Black Australian Stories" 345). The atrocities of the past and their continuation, and the present failure to apologise for those atrocities divides the different cultures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in Heiss' poetry.

Shoemaker points out that Indigenous literature in the 1990s is "marked by eclecticism" (346) and part of that eclecticism involves differing attitudes towards cultural differences and relationships between different cultures. In contrast to emphasising divisions between different cultures, some Indigenous poets demonstrate a more ambivalent attitude. For example, Lisa Bellear's poetry is less focused on the differences between non-Indigenous and Indigenous cultures and more interested in the mixing of traditional and urban cultures. The title of her first collection, *Dreaming in Urban Areas,* emphasises this combination. In "Urbanised Reebocks" the subject connects with her traditional Indigenous culture and people by remembering the time of the Dreaming:

> In a creek bed at Baroota
> I loose myself amongst the spirit of life of
> times where people
> that is Blak folk
> our mob – sang and laughed
> and danced – paint-em
> up big, red orchre
> was precious … go on
> remember –hear the
> sounds of flattened
> ground and broken gum
> leaves –  (15).

To enhance her connection with her traditional Indigenous culture, the subject seeks connection with the earth and to achieve this she frees herself of her urban culture which is symbolised by the Reebock shoes and Rayban sunglasses:

> My feet slip out of their
> urbanized reebocks/
> of sadness, which
> hides its loneliness
> behind broken reebans
>
> Uncloaked feet hit
> the earth …
> And its okay
> to cry (15).

Bellear's division between urban and traditional cultures is more ambivalent than the divisions characterising Heiss' non-Indigenous and Indigenous cultures. Although the urban culture is characterised by sadness and loneliness the traditional culture is also marked by sadness because when the subject connects with the earth and the Indigenous culture, she cries. One problem particular to the urban culture but not to the traditional Indigenous culture is constraint. Whereas the urban culture uses material possessions like Rayban sunglasses to hide emotions, the traditional Indigenous culture encourages emotional freedom and the demonstration of emotions through the cultural practices of dance and singing. However, the footnote contradicts the idea that the poem's author-subject holds a negative attitude towards the urban culture because she admits, "I love wearing these types of shoes and sunglasses". Cultural differences construct the subject in Bellear's poem, but both cultures are positively portrayed.

There are also new nineties Indigenous poets who emphasise relationship rather than division between different cultures. John Muk Muk Burke's tellingly entitled "Us",

acknowledges the different cultures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through the issue of spiritual belief but the poem encourages a sharing of cultures.

Us

A lamb's leg is broken.
And at the door of eternity
The bony crack breaks the back of chaos
And tracks through time and space
To the fiery start
At the secret heart of all things –
Yours and mine.

And the crack is the first little sound.

Flung across all time it drifts different –
Falls into some little certainties
Speaks our won realities
In churches and great caves
Breaks into our unities
In great churches, caves.

Cloud serpent
Spawned of darkness and chaos
He breathes.
He breathes different tunes,
Weaves different runes
Than the cry of fiat lux.

I kneel in your cathedral
Reading your Reality.
Is your book mine?
It overflows with truth.
(You say).
My name is Ruth.
I eat your Bread
You're in my head.

You inspect my cave.
Reading my reality.
Recording my reality.
Writing my reality.
But see
How all your Bread dries up
In the shadow of the Serpent.
And see, the Serpent cloud dissolves
In the shadow of your Bread.

> Taste the echo of my Rainbow
> Feel His flesh fade into the Nothing
> Like a Wafer on your tongue.
>
> Come, we feast Silently together. (*Night Song and Other Poems* 32-33)

Differences are acknowledged: non-Indigenous people have their churches, cathedrals, bible, the ritual of the holy Bread, and Indigenous people have their caves, Cloud Serpent and Rainbow Serpent who "breathes different tunes,/ Weaves different runes". Two responses towards these differences are evoked. The first, which the poem does not advocate, is the attempt of one culture to dominate the other. This interaction between different cultures is destructive for both cultures ("But see /How all your Bread dries up/In the shadow of the Serpent,/And see, the Serpent cloud dissolves/In the shadow of your Bread"). The advocated response to cultural difference is a sharing of cultures. Muk Muk Burke's poem invites non-Indigenous people to physically engage with his culture, to "Taste the echo of my Rainbow / Feel His flesh fade into the Nothing/ Like a Wafer on your tongue", so that similarities can be created and relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can be created.

Similarly, the poetry of new nineties Indigenous poet John Graham seeks connections and advocates the sharing of cultures between non-Inidgenous and Indigenous Australians. His poem, "Same One", suggests that it is "Time to share now", time for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to share their cultures "Or there will be dread to answer for / there / in our children's hearts":

> Our minds are like
> two ripples meeting
> a two-way mirror
>
> Same one water

same one air

We give and receive now
No more time now
Time to share now
No more fighting and anger
Time to be happy now

Or there will be dread to answer for
there
in our children's hearts

Our hearts are like
two volcanoes meeting
a two-way mirror

Same one earth
same one fire

We give and receive now
No more time now
Time to share now
No more greed and lying
Time to be happy now

Or there will be dread to answer for
there
in our children's hearts

Some one living
same on knowing (*Land Window* 18).

Rather than emphasise difference, this ritualistic poem emphasises the coming together of different cultures and the important similarities shared by the different cultures. United by the water we drink, the air we breathe, the earth we live on, the fire that warms us, and the future we hope for, the poem suggests that it is time for Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and peoples to share cultures. There is "No more time now" for "fighting and anger"; now is the time of giving and receiving. This suggests that it is time for Indigenous people to share their culture with non-Indigenous peoples and vice versa. Graham also suggests that when the different cultures come together as one, they will realise that the

differences are not as great as expected.  When the different cultures meet, the process will be like "a two-way mirror" which allows each to learn from the other and learn that there are many likenesses.  The poem suggests that seeing the other will be seeing the self in the other.

In "Our Old Us" Graham suggests that all people from all different cultures will be poisoned if we do not unite peacefully and hear the truths of our cultures.

> Do the people of the world
>   the world
> want poison food to eat us away?
> want poison air to blow us away?
>   Who knows?
>   Who?
>
> I know this –
> I wish
>
> That the truths in every culture
> would unite peacefully
> so we can be our old selves
> our Motherness
> our Fatherness
>
> our old us in peace (28).

The "truths in every culture" are all the same; they all have a "Motherness" and "Fatherness" that need to be listened to.  We will not hear these truths while watching television, but "maybe when we're asleep / we really are saying 'LISTEN'".

> Can't afford to listen so loud
> and not leave anything behind
> We must again
> listen quietly
> to leave it all as it was
> Time to hear the trees grow
> Time to hear the wind blow
>     for us to stay?
>    for us to stay!
> with Grandma
> and Grandpa
> To know the truth quietly

To look after the old, old people
Grandma earth
and Grandpa sky
to use our Motherness
and our Fatherness
wisely

our old us in peace (29).

When the "truths in every culture" "unite peacefully" we will hear that they are all saying the same thing: the way to save the world from destruction is to unite and work together.

In all Graham's poems, it is unity and oneness that are emphasised. We are many and different but we are one and the same: "All blood lines come from the one dawn / Blood makes the lines many yet one" ("Blood" 49). Spiritually we are all connected for the "spirit umbilically [is] the web of us all" ("The Human" 14). Like birds whose survival is ensured by their group knowledge, humans must flock together:

The Group Heart

Birds woven together

The complete V
the heart revealed

Group direction
the heart of their reality

A journey of each other
of food and home

Each held together
by a spiritual net woven
by the very old

To keep together
the group heart (37).

Different cultures and peoples are connected because we are all part of the human family and it is this connection that needs to be stressed.

It's understandable to feel confused, hateful, inferior
and desperate in these uncertain times
But it's not acceptable
to keep on letting the disharmony consume you
to keep on letting the learned racist attitudes
cut you off
from the rest of your human family
It's just not right to keep on sabotaging
peace with others ("Living Land" 51).

Graham's message is clear: we must "undo the war on each other" or it will destroy us and the world we live in. "Better we live together on a living land" for to live separately is certain death ("Living Land" 51). Like their predecessors, issues of cultural difference continue to be an all-important concern for new nineties Indigenous poets but the eclecticism of the 1990s is demonstrated by the varying perspectives and attitudes towards these important issues.

New nineties poets concerned with issues of cultural difference focus on the way these differences affect subjectivity and the role of language in the constitution of subjectivity. In her poem, "immigration", Marcella Polain addresses the problems of cultural difference from the perspective of one living in Australia but not born here:

father    we arrived decades too soon
refugees from wars too ancient and mundane for speech

like errant guests we set up camp
on this new country's steps
and waited for the stroke of nine

how we learned stealth
memorizing floor plans through the keyhole
wearing Australia like a dressup
our tongues split as timbers salvaged from some other place
each schoolyard taunt another hammer blow

i can not write
this language porous    fractured around nails
such unreliable cover

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through which small creatures fall and die
flesh opening to fetid heat (*Dumbstruck* 10).

In this poem language is a sign of difference that gives cause for schoolyard bullying and it fractures and fragments the subject's identity. The paradox of language, especially for poets, is that it is used against the subject but the subject also makes use of it. Language exposes cultural difference and thus it cannot be relied upon to hide one's 'other' identity ("unreliable cover"). In contrast to a type of safety net, subjectivity falls through language and dies.

Ouyang Yu's poetry engages with the struggle of being caught between different cultures and the pivotal role of language in this process:

translating myself is a problem
I mean how can I turn myself into another language
without surrendering myself
without betraying myself
without forgetting myself
without forgiving myself
without even losing myself in a different con/text

I mean how can English be so transparent
as not be able even to hide my china-skinned identity
I mean how can a language be so indestructible that
it remains itself while being turned into another ("Translating Myself" 82).

Just as Polain writes of a "porous" language which is an "unreliable cover" of cultural difference, Ouyang Yu ponders the transparency of language that exposes his "china-skinned identity". And just as Polain presents language as a force powerful enough to cause death (of subjectivity), Ouyang Yu perceives language as "indestructible" because it can be other than itself and itself at the same time. Unlike language, the subject's sense of self is not indestructible when it is both Chinese and English simultaneously (itself and other than itself) – there is a struggle between the two cultural identities and like Polain's poem, there is the risk that one will die.

The experience of exile from one's birthplace is equated with a sense of alienation for

Ouyang Yu:

> in a season without languages    in Australia
> I have lost my weight in undeveloped no-person's land
> like a wild devil roaming
> I sow my language into the alien soil
> where it sends forth strange flowers that no one recognises
> and all of a sudden I find my tongue held
> between two languages like a vice
>
> in a season of self-exile           in Australia
> I feel doubly alienated
> the death of the old world has such weird attractions
> while the light of the new world has somehow darkened ("Song for an Exile in
> Australia" 15).

The struggle between the different cultures, the "old" and the "new" world, are within the

subject and an ambivalent relationship exists between them.  Although "doubly alienated"

and constricted by being caught "between two languages like a vice", Ouyang Yu's poetry is

"more direct, more aggressive, more complex in its ambivalence and more confident in its

acute sense of exile than anything I've read before by an Australian poet", as Alex Miller

comments on the back cover blurb.  This is particularly evident in the poem after which the

collection is entitled, "moon over melbourne":

> moon over melbourne you bloody australian moon
> you hang on you all right you no worries mate
> you make me sick home sick for sure
>
> you put every body to a multicultural sleep
> who knows not what is meant by
> one dancing with oneself and one's shadow under you (8-9).

Swearing at the moon and criticizing Australia are hardly signs of a tongue being held in a

vice.  Ouyang Yu, like Mateer, is not afraid to tackle the difficult issues and writes

confidently about being caught between cultures to create poems that challenge complacency.

Poets living in Australia but born elsewhere, like Mateer and Ouyang Yu, remind readers that the subject in exile is a diasporic position, a position that takes no-place as home. From this position of exile and displacement, other cultures are wrestled with through the issues of place, language, and subjectivity. For critical readers this position can never be forgotten and as Gunew and Longley suggest in their methods of reading "via cultural difference", a renegotiated attention to this "theme of exile" is paramount when considering literature written by those others living in a country they were not born in (*Striking Chords* xvi).

## *Hybridity*

As post-colonial theorist Edward Said reminds us, it is necessary to be mindful of the distinctions amongst "exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés" for, unlike the position of an immigrant, the position of exile cannot be separated from the "age-old practice of banishment" (181). In the case of John Mateer, exile is not brought about by banishment and thus there will be a different form of politics at work in his poetry. Said's distinctions are useful when considering Mateer's position: "White settlers in Africa, parts of Asia and Australia may once have been exiles, but as pioneers and nation-builders, they lost the label 'exile'" (181). It is obvious that I am entangling Mateer the person with Mateer the poet (and his poetry), and I agree with Michael Heald's comment that "[a]lthough it is wrong to identify the speaker in a poem simplistically with the poet, in Mateer's work there is usually not a great sense of difference between the two" ("Talking with Yagan's Head" 388). (This is often the case when poets engage with cultural difference.) In the case of Mateer's

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poetry, the poet and the politics of his poetry need to be considered together. Thus while the theme of exile and the related diasporic position are constants and important when reading via cultural difference, Mateer's poetry is less demonstrative of a politics of exile than a politics of hybridity.

Attending to a politics of hybridity, as theorised by Ien Ang in *On Not Speaking Chinese*, is a way of foregrounding "complicated entanglement rather than identity, togetherness-in-difference rather than virtual apartheid" (3). Ang emphasises the "importance of hybridity as a basis for cultural politics in a world in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them, between the different and the same, here and there" (3). Drawing on her own experiences as a "multiple migrant" (4), living in-between the cultures of Asia and the West, and the "major cultural and historical developments which have taken place in the past thirty to forty years or so" (5), Ang posits that a politics of hybridity is an appropriate way of conceptualising our present state of being in the world because rather than erase difference it emphasises difference:

> Hybridity is a concept which confronts and problematizes all these boundaries, although it does not erase them. As a concept, hybridity belongs to the space of the frontier, the border, the contact zone. As such, hybridity always implies a blurring or at least a problematizing of boundaries, and as a result, an unsettling of identities . . . borders are not easily crossed or transgressed, on the contrary. Precisely our encounters at the border – where self and other, the local and the global, Asia and the West meet – make us realize how riven with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict those encounters can be. This tells us that hybridity, the very condition of in-betweenness, can never be a question of simple shaking hands, of happy, harmonious merger and fusion. Hybridity is not a solution, but alerts us to the incommensurability of differences, their ultimately irreducible resistance to complete dissolution. In other words, hybridity is a heuristic device for analysing complicated entanglement. (18-19)

It is this "complicated entanglement" that informs Mateer's poetry and his engagement with cultural difference.

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### Postmodern or Post-colonial?

Ang uses the term hybridity within a post-colonial theoretical framework; her project theorises cultural difference. Yet her post-colonial context is also, as she states, "a thoroughly postmodern context" (17). There has been much debate about the differences and similarities between post-colonialism and postmodernism and the term 'hybridity' is used by both post-colonial and postmodern theorists. However, when the term 'hybridity' is used by postmodern theorists it is often devoid of a thoroughly post-colonial context. In relation to Mateer's poetry, cultural difference is the most important issue and it is imperative that the term 'hybridity' work hand-in-hand with issues of cultural difference. While some theorists suggest that both postmodern and post-colonial theories share similar thematic and strategic concerns (Hutcheon, Connor) those specifically interested in the issues of race are more skeptical. Sneja Gunew warns:

> While using some of the elements of postmodernist theory, these critics [feminists and postcolonialists] have also been alert to its own propensity for universalizing, notably as a master narrative of crisis and delegitimation, and to its continued purloining of minority cultures, particularly in its appropriation of the marginal position without the experience of material oppression. ("PostModern Tensions" 24)

Gunew does not rule out the possible usefulness of postmodern theories, but when reading via cultural difference critics must be aware of the problems.

Amanda Wilson's review of Mateer's *Burning Swans* (*Australian Book Review*), demonstrates some of the problems which can arise when a postmodern approach is applied to an intensely culturally orientated poetry without a consideration of cultural difference. Wilson claims that the "book raises questions about experimentation and the communicative purpose of poetry"; it "focuses on postmodern concerns, engaging in a dialectic between

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memory and forgetting, presence and absence, speech and silence"; it "wrestle[s] with communication, identity and personality" (51). Read via a postmodern framework Wilson categorises Mateer's poetry as experimental and thus finds it unsuccessful, concluding: "Verse this is not, but neither is it great poetry of a conceptual/experimental sort". Wilson acknowledges that besides these postmodern concerns there are other concerns evident in Mateer's poetry, commenting that he "writes with a personal knowledge of cultural disjunction, his separation from South Africa realised through writing in absentia". However, she does not consider these postmodern concerns within the context of cultural difference, nor does she acknowledge her own experience of "cultural disjunction" as it plays itself out in her reading experience. Even though she comments that Mateer informs readers (via his notes) that the disturbances created in the poetry are a "recognition of loss", Wilson does not consider this loss in the context of cultural difference. Aggravated by the inappropriateness of Wilson's critical framework, Mateer wrote to the editor of *Australian Book Review* to object to her over-arching use of the term "postmodern". He states that by categorising his poetry as postmodern Wilson avoids a focused critical "consideration" so that her review "deflects attention away from particularities and results in a cartoon". Worse still, by grouping concerns like "memory and forgetting, presence and absence, speech and silence" under the banner of "postmodern concerns", Wilson is guilty of "transnational, transcultural pretensions". Mateer points out that these concerns may be "postmodern concerns" for some but they are "not merely that" in his poetry. In his poetry these issues have cultural significance and need to be considered from a culturally specific perspective. As an example he points out that "[F]orgetting for a South African in Australia is profoundly different from that same process were it affecting an Aboriginal person". Although poetry critics may not always be able to comprehend the different cultural responses to these

complex issues, poetry criticism needs to attend to their presence.  I suggest that in the case

of Mateer's poetry the critical apparatus of the postmodern may not be the most effective

because reading via cultural difference cannot adequately be incorporated into the

framework.

One of the poems Wilson finds unsatisfactory is "Other Languages".  This is a poem that

juxtaposes cultural difference by alternating Afrikaans and English language:

> III (Mens)
>
> Gister, of in die nag, ek het gedroom
> Yesterday, or in the night, I had dreamed
> van die digter wie in sy swart pakklere
> of the poet who in black formal suit
> en morfienslapp *Die Stem van Suid*
> and morphine-sleep wrote South Africa's
> *Afrika* geskryf het. Bod die wolke, op my
> national anthem. Above clouds, on my
> Drakensberg van gedagtes staan
> Drakensberg of memories, he stands
> hy op die uitkyk.
> as lookout. (40)

Read as cultural difference, poetry criticism might position this poem within the framework

of migrant writing.  Gunew and Longley suggest that migrant writing can fall into three areas

("which may all occur in the same writer and are by no means constructed as an evolutionary

model") (*Striking Chords* xxi).   The poem, "Other Language", can be understood as

corresponding to the first area which is "Said's contrapuntal vision insofar as it deals with

those texts which juxtapose the old and the new cultures" (xxi).  Mateer's poem is also *unlike*

much migrant writing that falls into this area because rather than celebrate his place of birth

he focuses on issues of violence, poverty, and the lack of freedom experienced by many in

Africa.  Some poems brutally portray South Africa, as in "Johannesburg":

> And as my cousin's husband sped through the Sunday

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> streets, past billboards warning of AIDS and hotels
> fronting-up like Wild West towns and factories and the city
> with its two skinny gilded towers and the township
> where, when 'during all that shit taking this
> freeway was taking a hellova chance', where those robots signify
> the most hijackings in the country, all the way my
> eyes were seeing what I had forgotten.  Around (*Barefoot Speech* 32).

And, over the page we read "An African City" which commences:

> They tell me Joburg's just awful
>    full of blacks, an African city, dangerous
> They tell me Nigerians and Columbians there
>    are selling cocaine, brewing crack, ruining lives
> They tell me there's also Senegalese having
> prayer-meetings and Angolans speaking like Porans and
> Mozambicans selling AKs and pistols and
> (so-called) Swazi princesses caught in the
> act their tenants think is 'mos flesh' (34).

The repetition and consistent rhythm suggest that this list of violence is endless and even expected.  This 'normal' degree of violence is echoed in "White": "The police outside, being boys like me, didn't / know what to think, regarded the burnt cars with / the nonchalance they reserve for normality, and again, / just to be safe, opened fire" (*Anachronism* 53).  Mateer's poetry does not reflect a nostalgic or romanticised version of his place of birth, for as "In Answer" makes clear, "My birthcountry's shame has / left me void" ("In Answer" 71 *Anachronism*).

Wilson complains of "dialogue that shift[s] us around without warning" and of the reader having to "work hard to complete, and in some cases construct sense from these poems".  It is not surprising that readers struggle with "Other Language" because this is a poem written from a different language and a different culture and, although unacknowledged, Wilson's review reveals some of the difficulties encountered when reading poetry written from different cultural perspectives.  Her reading experience is characterised by a number of

losses: a loss of meaning, and most predominantly a loss of familiarity caused by different languages, different poetic movements and styles. Is it a coincidence that this reading experience resonates with the experience of hybridity, of the "*difficulties* of 'dealing with difference' " (Ang 180)?

Rather than regard the poetry as unsuccessful, as Wilson does, one way of understanding the reading experiences of this poem is to read it via cultural difference. The disturbing, alienating and confusing experiences of reading this poem are not unlike the experiences of engaging with different cultures. Wilson's review tells much of her experience of Mateer's poetry, and these experiences are not comfortable ones. Her experience is described as "confusing" because it is disorienting ("snatches of dialogue that shift us around without warning"), and alienating ("inaccessible, the aporia too much a private space where the writing remains locked in its own suspended obscurity"). Wilson assures us that it is not her lack of ability that prevents her from liking the poetry for she does not "mind having to work hard as a reader", but she finds there "isn't enough reward, in this case, for the hard work" because there is "too much of Mateer's private non-speech". In his *Westerly* article "The Use of Burning Swans: the South African background to an 'iconoclastic' language", Mateer comments on one of the reason readers could not fully comprehend what he is doing in the poem "Other Languages":

> I made the problem of my work more difficult through my use of the Afrikaans poetry tradition and influences. Most of the readers of *Burning Swans* will not be familiar with the political subtleties of Afrikaans poets like Eugene N. Marias, Ingrid Jonker, Uys Krige or Breyten Breytenbach, nor of my development of their issues, so I have chosen [in this article] not to consider my relationship to a "white" South African tradition. (53)

Gunew and Longley's critical framework for reading via cultural difference emphasises this point by suggesting that readers of literature by writers from different cultures need an

understanding of the different literary traditions which influence migrant writers (*Striking Chords* xvii). If a critic does not possess this understanding it is inappropriate and insufficient for poetry criticism to dismiss the poetry in the way that Wilson does. Certainly the occasion of a review does not grant the time for the reviewer to inform themselves of another poetry tradition, but it is most important that the reviewer acknowledges that it is because of cultural difference that readers may find this poem (and others) difficult. (For those readers who want to be informed Mateer suggests: "For a comprehensive introduction to the Afrikaans dissident tradition with a particular emphasis on poetry see Jack Cope's *The Adversary Within: Dissident Writers in Afrikaans* (London, Rex Collings, 1982)".)

One of the issues Wilson's review raises about Mateer's poetry is the difficulty or lack of communication between the reader and the poetry. The context of her claim regarding the "aporias of communication" is relevant here:

> 'Other language' is a four-part poem that alternates lines in Afrikaans and English, demonstrating, as Mateer's notes put it, 'the approximate nature of language'. He describes the 'disturbance in the poems' as a recognition of loss'. This disturbance is marked by aporias of communication, failures of connections. Typically, the poems are strung together by the poet's observations interspersed with snatches of dialogue that shift us around without warning (51).

These "failures of connections", disturbances caused by loss, and the "aporias of communication" are all issues stemming from the space of contact between different cultures and Mateer's poetry "make[s] us realize how riven with potential miscommunication" these cross-cultural encounters can be (Ang *On Not Speaking Chinese,* 17). As a non-migrant belonging to a dominant reading culture, Mateer's use of the Afrikaans language 'others' my (and Wilson's) English speaking position and confounds the power relations between the dominant and the dominated.

Michael Heald's critical discussion comments on the aporias of communication in Mateer's poetry, referring to this issue as "the resistance to conventional ways of meaning" ("Talking with Yagan's Head"). Heald suggests that the aporias of communication arise from Mateer's "specific experience of apartheid":

> Having witnessed the propagation and effects of a state ideology, Mateer is at pains in his work to scrutinise processes of thought and feeling as they form into attitudes, motives and actions, to glean and conserve forms of hope and life-affirmation which are not those generally offered, and to eschew the drawing of recognizable conclusions. (388)

While this desire to revolutionise the way we think and feel by avoiding the too-easy mode of communication may be brought about by Mateer's experience of apartheid, within a politics of hybridity issues of communication or aporias of communication have a particular relevance.

Communication is the subject of Ang's chapter on the clash between feminism and post-colonialism, "I'm A Feminist But . . . 'Other' women and postnational identities" (177-192). Ang suggests that the expectation of communication when dealing with difference is problematic because it reveals an "over-confident faith in the power and possibility of open and honest communication to 'overcome' or 'settle' differences" (179). Attention to cultural difference and a politics of hybridity work by "paying attention to, . . . those painful moments at which communication seems unavoidably to *fail*" (180).

> Rather than assuming that ultimately a common ground can be found . . . – on the *a priori* assumption that successful communication can be achieved – we might do better to start from point zero and realize that there may be moments at which no common ground exists whatsoever, and when any communicative event would be nothing more than a case of speaking past one another. I want to suggest, moreover, that these moments of ultimate failure of communication should not be encountered with regret, but rather should be accepted as the starting point (181)

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to "confronting the incommensurability of the difference involved" (181) when cultures collide, crash and clash.

In Mateer's engagement with cultural difference he constantly attends to moments where communication occurs, and to those "painful moments at which communication seems unavoidably to *fail*" (Ang 180).  Mateer offers many ways of communicating across cultures. For example, a common poetic device is observation of different ways of being, as in the following poem:

> Be Careful
>
> be mindful if you wake someone here:
> their soul could be away, wandering,
>
> and mightn't return if you suddenly wake them
> and they'd be left alone, insane, homeless.
>
> Then you'd have to feed them as ghosts,
> leaving bowls at intersections or outside your doors,
>
> and they'd haunt you like an hereditary disease
> or the criminality of the invisible. (*Loanwords* 56)

Here the speaker warns of the ramifications of behaving without knowledge of certain beliefs of a particular culture.  Many of Mateer's poems employ compassion and empathy for particular cultures:

> Exile
>
> Serpil spoke about the beautiful country,
> where you wouldn't think those things
> would happen, where Kurds live in
> black tents on plateaux I have imagined.
>
> She told us about her father's friend
> who was tortured having hot eggs
> splattered in his armpits, molten yolk
> rippling over scar-tissue, burning a mouth.

> And I thought of comparable tortures, of
> those I'd read and of my friends in
> other countries that I can't imagine.
> And I said nothing. I thought: Shame. (*Burning Swans* 35)

One specific national culture Mateer engages with is Indonesia. *Mister! Mister! Mister!* (1999) is a pamphlet of poems written when Mateer was the inaugural Writer-in-Residence at the Australia Centre in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. (Poems from this pamphlet also appear in *Loanwords* (47-66) and it is these I shall quote from as this collection is more readily available than the pamphlet.) In this foreign country the speaker of the poems attempts cross-cultural communication:

> Even the minarets are sirens and daylight a thieving.
> Here female eyes shout volumes at me.
> Beside what was my soul, wordless men pedal their gliding becaks.
> Through a phrasebook I stutter, bargain for space, mask disbelief. ("Marlboro Man" 55)

Communication is attempted visually ("female eyes shout volumes"), silently ("wordless men"), and via the use of the other language ("phrasebook", "becaks"). This poem concludes with an unusual use of the word "ok":

> In the desperate theatre of speech I dream ok.
> Under the polychrome statuary of Kali's temple in Kampung Keling,
> I fade out ok.
> The translated man I am is becoming numerical: zero, ok. (55)

Here the use of the word "ok" is evidence of a common occurrence in cross-cultural communication. That is, simple words are often used by both visitor and local to communicate a great deal across their cultural divides. In this poem "ok" functions as a question and an answer within the cross-cultural communication process, and the poem suggests that communication is enabled.

Yet Mateer's poetics is less characterised by these moments of communication than "those painful moments at which communication seems unavoidably to *fail*". Ang suggests that within a politics of hybridity communication should not be expected without an immense attempt "to listen and hear" others (179). As previously discussed, this is what John Graham urges in "Our Old Us": "listen quietly" to the "truths in every culture", listen to the earth and sea, listen to each other so that we can live in peace together. As the following demonstrates, Mateer's poetics shares this premise of listening:

> My task as a "poet" was to attempt to formulate a voice by listening to the disturbing echoes of my synthetic speech. My listening was an investigation of stratas of pain and history. The listening was a slender, slender hope – that in the rumble of an apocalyptic, deceiving, self-serving voice the throat's flesh could be heard and the tongue's gentle, animal-like rasping could be remembered. It's imperative to recognise that what took place was not intended to be an existential experiment. It wasn't an urge to discover the truth of myself for myself (yet in part it might have become that); rather *my hope was to discover how I had become myself through others* and call that my truth-seeking's object. I was forced to confront the fact that as a "white" South African émigré who recognised his own moral, historical and ontological vacuity I had no claim to universal human rights or moral imperatives, or even the right to the ear of people who weren't in a similar predicament to me. I felt I was compelled to be empty. To become empty. I was unwilling to become anything else until I could understand my human responsibilities. ("The Use of Burning Swans" 57 emphasis added)

This compacted statement reveals much about Mateer's poetics of hybridity: his attempt in poetry to find his "voice" recognises first and foremost that his voice is a hybrid voice, a "synthetic speech", rather than an essentially grounded voice (Ang uses the term "disorganic" 50). The process of searching for his voice involves "listening" to the different aspects that form this "synthetic speech" which are the "pain and history" of "others" for he knows that there is no one central being but a hybrid self who is that self "through others". Listening and attending to the "pain and history" of others does not provide Mateer with a self-assured way to live for he humbly admits that he has "no claim to universal human rights or moral imperatives". However, Mateer's poetry is nonetheless driven by a desire to

"understand" what "human responsibilities" are to be performed by listening to the failures of communication which occur as cultures collide both within and without the self.

The process of that understanding involves attending to the failures of communication across different cultures and attending to the self as understood through these entanglements. "When I'm Called 'A Human' …" (*Anachronism* 83-84) is a poem that explicitly explores these issues. It commences with a profoundly entangled scene:

> I'm in a small room with a German woman
> whose friend's child fell into his Death from an Egyptian pyramid
> I'm in my kitchen reciting an Afrikaans lyric
> by the woman who drowned herself in Three Anchor Bay
> I'm polyrhythmic on this balcony observing the sky darken violet
> sinking into evening – I'm not only there I have
>
> this mind on relatives on four continents:
> on an isle in the South Atlantic,
> on neighbours whose homes contain stories of
> an escape from Romania,
> of Bush and Dirty Wars,
> of countries which dissolved or whose names were changed, of Moslems
> who where threatened during the Gulf War,

Evidenced here are the varieties of cultures that form part of the subject's sense of self. The epigraph by Leopold Sedar Senghor at the beginning of *Loanwords* captures the fragmented self of this poem: "*Ah! am I not divided enough?*" (7). Important to the self's relationship with these others and other cultures are the tragedies that come with them, especially war. The subject listens to the atrocities of human existence via a teacher:

> Witnesses expecting a new world like
>
> Eden – Once a teacher told me she found one of her little
> students in her class before school, "he'd been there
> all night. He had come to draw me a picture. He couldn't sleep at home:
> the power and water had been turned off and all his rellies were
> over. He had no quiet place to sleep. He was hungry and
> cold. (sighs) You don't know what to do …" Yes –

Listening to different cultures produces a questioning of subjectivity:

> What is there in the mirror? Who? An old Khmer woman hollowed by
> torture? And that on the radio? One bulldozer uncovering a
> Koori burial ground in the path of a highway? That's
>     not a face. Is that anything like *me*?

In his mirror reflection the speaking subject sees his hybrid self. The question this verse paragraph concludes with involves two aspects of the subject's renegotiation of self because there are two different types of others: victims and perpetrators. Here the process of self-renegotiation involves a relation to the old Khmer woman and the buried Koori, but at the same time this process acknowledges the painful relationship between the self and those who have tortured the old Khmer woman and those who are disrespectfully digging up the Koori grave. Displacement and disconnection from both the self and others are induced by feelings of shame for the atrocities humans perpetrate on other humans (and so the poem concludes with the subject relating to a dog). The subject is exiled from those others he relates to because his relationship with the perpetrators produces a division. The subject asks: "What must I do [. . .] to feel human? – I feel afraid when I'm called 'a human'." The undesirable side of human nature and the tragedies of life are common themes in Mateer's oeuvre ("In The Alley" 23, "And a Portrait of a Petrolhead" 46-48 in *Anachronism*; "Their Fight" 34, "The Drought" 32 in *Burning Swans*; "Silence" 36 in *Barefoot Speech*).

Michael Heald discusses the theme of self-recognition as played out in Mateer's poetry in relation to the poem "Then, to Myself" (*Anachronism* 36). Like "When I'm Called 'A Human' …", there is a resistance to self-recognition in "Then, to Myself" because with this recognition is that which one does not want to be entangled. As Heald notes of this poem, the "source" of the undesired recognition "is implicitly that of a common judgment of white

South Africans" and of equal relevance to both poems "is the awful need to do this" (390), to acknowledge one's human responsibility.

### Indigenous Australians

Cultural entanglement, "togetherness-in-difference" (Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese* 5), involves renegotiating the division between the self and others by attempting to share or learn something of the other's culture. Mateer's poetry is important because it attempts this renegotiating process with the cultures of Indigenous Australians. Mateer's poem "When I'm Called 'A Human' …" (*Anachronism* 83-84) can be read as accepting Muk Muk Burke's invitation by engaging with Indigenous culture through the medium of poetry/language.

> I plan a trip to go hiking in the mountains.
>    I buy a word-list of the endangered language that
> names this place, my leg and fire with
> sounds almost as alienating as the Latin tongue
> of explorers.

The subject attempts to listen to the different culture by purchasing a type of dictionary of the almost extinct language that belongs to the Indigenous peoples of this area. Yet rather than create a connection between himself and the other culture of the Aboriginal Australians, the differences are profoundly felt, the painful failure of communication occurs and produces a distancing effect ("alientating"). Here the subject comments on his lack of belonging which is doubly felt because he neither belongs to the culture of Indigenous Australians nor those Europeans who settled in Australia, the "explorers". The subject's association with those who have perpetrated atrocities against Indigenous Australians (as acknowledged in the previous lines) is also a culture he feels alienated from. Yet, like Muk Muk Burk, Mateer reveals a strong conviction that sharing different cultures is vitally important and the poem continues in this attempt even when the subject feels further

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alienated. For Mateer there is little certainty that these attempts are 'right', for the subject "feel[s] under these hallucinatory suburbs the morphology undulate". The importance of this line is emphasised formally by placing it in isolation from the other verse paragraphs, so that it forms a single-lined section. The process of reading the land through the Indigenous "endangered language" is the morphology (a word that incorporates the double process of studying the biology and the language). Mateer's use of the Latin derived word "morphology" emphasises that the speaking subject is more alienated from Indigenous Australians than from his Latin-tongued explorers ("almost as alienating"). However, the poem does not present the morphology with confidence and surety but rather with uncertainty ("undulated").


**"The Brewery Site"** *(Anachronism 85-89)*[1]

Reading within the critical framework of cultural difference "The Brewery Site" represents similar processes to those found in "When I'm Called 'A Human' …". Cultural entanglement is integral to the subject's renegotiation of self in the context of others. In this poem otherness is explored through an Aboriginal sacred site and the religious culture it encompasses. Mateer's notes inform readers of the importance of the site and help to establish something of the context with which to understand the poem:

> The site of the Old Swan Brewery has been a place of contention at least since the brewery relocated twenty years ago. Situated on a bank of the Swan River two kilometres from the Perth CBD, it has often been reported as a verifiable sacred site. The 'Rainbow Serpent' is said to have been seen there in recent memory, although certain anthropologists dispute this. At the time of preparing this book for publication, the partially renovated brewery building remains empty and the conflict between the Aboriginal people, the construction company and the government is still unresolved. (*Anachronism* 96)

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[1] Mateer has extensively revised and rewritten this poem since this publication, see forthcoming Vagabond Press publication.

The poem is thus framed by conflict caused by cultural clashes.

Like "When I'm Called 'A Human' …" the subject of the poem attempts to connect with the different culture and place. This concern with the relationship between the self and place is a predominant feature of intercultural or post-colonial literatures:

> A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. . . . A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by *dislocation*, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by *cultural denigration,* the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. . . . Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the mythos of identity and authenticity area feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Triffin 9)

The subject in "The Brewery Site" is indeed displaced and seeking connection with a place he does not belong to. The poem commences with the speaking subject walking through the Botanical Gardens looking at the trees marked with their botanical names.

> Up here in the Botanical Gardens the plants are only labelled
> With their 'proper' names, no anecdotes, histories or mythologies.
> Those birds use them anyway.

These "proper" names are as useless to the subject and his desire to connect to place as they are to the birds that feed and shelter in the trees. This similarity between the birds and the subject is further strengthened by the fact that neither know the other stories of this place, the "anecdotes, histories and mythologies" that would assist the subject to connect to this place. Those who do possess the mythologies to connect to this place are the absent Aborigines. Without the Aborigines to guide him through this place the subject is like the birds and uses the trees "anyway", without knowing their stories. It is as if there is no alternative and the subject's need to "use them anyway" is as imperative as the birds' need to

feed and shelter amongst the trees. A failure is thus noted in this opening verse paragraph, but the subject pushes on down an "informal path". This pathway is not presented as an important official or designated roadway, rather the subject's journey is a humble wandering.

Complicating this attempt to relate to place is an imagined site and the contrasting reality the subject finds: "I'm down there looking at a trough of green water / *They've named (Thou), Kennedy Fountain,* / The first public spring in the Perth area, the sign tells me. There's / none of the place I imagined". The subject had imagined that he would find some sort of sign of the sacred, something of what the Indigenes of this area relate to, but to his disappointment he is not so fortunate. A tone of sadness and disappointment is created formally by the slow rhythm, repetition and long meandering lines and words like "dispairing" (sic) and the experience of thwarted expectations. The subject had hoped to renegotiate his sense of self through contact with a place that belongs to the Indigenous Australians. He had hoped that some type of convergence between himself and the different culture of those indigenous to this area would occur, but he finds that the "Currents [of different cultures] aren't converging" (repeated in six lines) and "The sacred won't be apparent" for the hybrid subject.

Other cultures mix and mingle within the subject's thoughts as he reaches out to this place:

> hairy dragons twist from Himalayan migraines
> from new steaming Drakensberg mountains, from my heart's creek, from
> the Sleeping Croc's land, the Ring of Pacific fire, and from the
> holes of Aotearoan volcanos (sic), up, bursting through geyser nostrils and
> into the eye on which these my two feet appear to be standing
> : 'the Mother's body': the throat between dark skies, Leading me to say,
>
> > "feng shui aligns my corpse with tree limbs and a vague head"
> > "Kundalini entwines each vertebra, floating up my spinal column like
> the hush of an elevator"

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"stiffen my skin's surface expecting acupuncture needles" (86).

Here the subject turns to yet an/other culture in his attempt to connect the self and place.

With these words the subject is trying to open his spirit to the sacredness of the Indigenous

site by calling upon a form of spiritual philosophy that he has connected with. The religious

beliefs of this poem, as in most of Mateer's poetry, are influenced by his Buddhist beliefs.

Kundalini is the "manifestation of the divine mother" and Kundalini yoga is a practice

believed to access a

> huge reserve of spiritual energy at the base of the spine. This reserve of energy is
> known as the kundalini…When the kundalini is aroused, it is said to ravel up the
> spine through six centers of consciousness, reaching the seventh, the center of the
> brain. As it reaches the higher centers, it produces various degrees of enlightenment.
> (Prabhavananda)

The subject calls to Kundalini, the divine mother:

> *O mother, O mother-Land*
> walking like an ant I'm searching for my culture
> I don't have a simile for my face here
> As hills fly into clouds, the Wagyls that I don't know, can swallow and curse me,

Because of the experience of disconnection (from the sacred site) the subject's sense of a full

self is "denied": "Now in this sight I am denied". The subject's distress reaches a climax at

this point with the succeeding line of desperation: "*Is this what I have lived for Mother, Mom?*"

Cultural differences prevent the subject from experiencing a satisfying spiritual connection

with place. The use of the word sight, rather than site, emphasises that it is the subject's

failure to see the sacred that causes the disconnection. To overcome this disability of

sight/site the subject turns to what he has found to be a helpful form of spirituality, which

is also borrowed from a different culture.


By calling upon a different spirituality the subject is enabled a glimpse of the sacred:

> in my peripheral vision – I am walking towards the building, confronting

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that (*exhale*) of traffic that I heard from the garden as panting daemons
and see now – the black serpent are muscles squeezing from the soil, evolving from
root, congealing into trunk, a world of shadowy face whose secrets are leaves
tilted towards a distant Sun.

There is no pretense of knowing or fully connecting to the spirituality of this place. It is after all only a partial vision ("peripheral vision") the subject catches. Furthermore, the poem does not focus on this slight vision but rather the subject's sight is immediately disturbed by a European presence in the form of the London plane tree. This disturbance is formally produced by the absence of a break between the last line of the vision and the European plane tree: "tilted towards a distant Sun. / On the ground I find the fruit of a London plane tree, in various decay."


This disturbance in the connection between the self and the sacred site, the self and Indigenous spirituality, is produced by the subject's connection to European culture, and a childhood memory:

I remember crushing
them in our Transvaal backyard when I should have been raking up their crackly
                                                                          brown leaves
as Father commanded. They were like Maple leaves … Remember how Dad
loved them, their trunks mottled like camouflage?

Interestingly the interrupting European culture is gendered male by being connected with the Father. It is as if the (divine) mother, who the subject is addressing, offers the possibility of connection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures but this relation is thwarted by the culture of the Father. The subject directly addresses his mother about the incongruousness of the Father being present in this "*mother-Land*": "*O ma, why are these European trees / grasping at the earth here?*" There is the question of whether non-Indigenous culture could learn something from Indigenous culture by keeping women's business and men's business separate: "*Could the elders / tell woman's business from men's in a white man's world?*

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*Should they*?" The cultural entanglements presented in Mateer's poetry often raise unanswered (unanswerable?) questions, suggesting that it is less important for answers to be provided than the questioning itself.

In the interconnection between self and place, place reflects self like a mirror. It is for this reason the subject asks, "*Why are men fighting their faces?*" and it is for this reason that the subject's disconnection to the land means that "This land won't be a face, not for me." The dislocated subject is a "blank sheet of paper" who vanishes in this "Bibbulum woman's place".

Amongst all this uncertainty the subject tells us what he is sure of:

> Let me tell you what I do know – Years ago on the tv news
> > I saw protestors flying the land rights flag fighting police arm over arm
> > I was once told though can't remember the Nyungar name for this place
> > I had to read to envisage the people still teaching their kids there and
> the Yorgal-Wagyl's urine that is said to be the fountain of her disappearance after the
> creation of the lakes and rivers
> > – I don't know how true any of this is
> > I don't want to speak of a rape I can't understand
> > I don't want to be another appearance among many
> ghosts whose eyes are sewn and whose mouths open to spew yawns like
> 'rainbows' – I will not
> feel face or body filling this silence,

Here the poem explicitly juxtaposes a post-colonial position with a colonial position, presenting the subject as against those (colonialists or racists) who seek to dominate and take as their own what rightfully belongs to others. In contrast to the subject's struggle to see, the colonialists' (white ghosts) "eyes are sewn" shut. The poem suggests that the desire to see (the desire to connect with different cultures) may only lead to partial sight but that is better than the absence of a desire to see. Closed eyes are here both literal and metaphorical

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in that connection to a sacred site literally and necessarily calls upon seeing place, while metaphorically the desire to see is the desire to connect with different cultures.

In the next part of this line the poem criticises the colonial position which appropriates Indigenous culture, like the stories of the Rainbow Serpent and sacred sites. This is done, like the colonial closed eyes, in contrast to the position of the poem. That is, the poem, via the subject of the poem, juxtaposes its position to that of a colonialist position: "I will not / feel face or body filling this silence".

Here a rejection of the self as all important, referred to earlier in the poem as the "vanishing 'I'", does not involve an appropriation of the spirituality of the Indigenous culture. Not once in the poem does the subject capture the spirituality he attempts to connect with. As the poem concludes, the subject seems to find some form of peace with his self and the sacred site:

> I close my eyes, Let my voice walk away.
> Sit down on the paving at the water's edge.
> Around a seated man translucent paperbarks and swamp peppermints
> avoid
> observing him. As a glimpse they are returning to hug soil, caress
> the travelling sediment. The man rises, slowly walks.

The poems ends with the subject reconciling himself and the sacred site by becoming

> like a stone sitting here above the slippery waterline
> Feeling the roots dig like ropes into a mother's flesh
> Feeling the dolphins and small sharks pass either way, while
> the motorists and cyclists and joggers airily rush,
> and this season's speckled jellyfish, like tongues, throb between the rocks.

Just as Muk Muk Burke's poem encourages physical engagement ("Taste", "Feel"), the above verse paragraph demonstrates that a connection is enabled by touch, by physical embodiment. The subject's attempt to learn from and connect with Aboriginal culture is

combined with the subject's own sense of embodiment so as to connect with the environment.

### Reconciliation & Disharmony

Mateer's engagement with the cultures of Indigenous Australians can be understood as part of the process of reconciliation that characterises the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the 1990s. Those poems that seek an understanding of the connection between Indigenous cultures/peoples and the Australian land can be perceived as following the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's declaration, *Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation* (presented by the Council at Corroboree 2000 at the Sydney Opera House), which states that "[t]hrough understanding the spiritual relationship between the land and its first peoples, we share our future and live in harmony". Like the postmodern ethics of Zygmunt Bauman, Mateer's poetry seeks positive ways of 'becoming' – living, thinking, feeling – in a world characterised by diversity and difference. The relationships between different cultures are not presented as unproblematic but nor are they nihilistically portrayed. Mateer attends to the ambiguous and ambivalent relations between different cultures without seeking "absolutes, universals and foundations" to 'fix' these conditions (Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* 4).

Despite Mateer's intentions, some Indigenous people do not perceive his poetry as reconciliatory. On the contrary, some Indigenous people find his poetry offensive and disrespectful. At a Fremantle Arts Centre Press literary event John Mateer and Indigenous writer Kim Scott read their work. The poems Mateer read, "The Brewery Site" and "In the Presence of a Severed Head", evoked criticism from Kim Scott. Scott raised objections to

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Mateer's poetry because he believed that the "Aboriginal issues shouldn't have been written" and accused Mateer of having "no shame" ("Re: bio details." Email to Author. 20 Feb. 2002). Mateer commented that the event became "quite heated, [and] quietly aggressive" and left him feeling "stupid and regretful", confused because he doesn't "understand the subtleties of Australian culture" and wishing "I had a country I could go back to". In order to better understand this disagreement I contacted Kim Scott who generously agreed to discuss the event and his reading of Mateer's poems.

Scott's comments demonstrate that from his Indigenous perspective the cultural entanglements presented in Mateer's poems are inappropriate because they do not show respect for Indigenous culture. In particular, it is Mateer's use of the Indigenous or Noongar language that Scott finds most problematic. ('Noongar' is also spelt as 'Nyoongar'.) Scott raises the issue when he asks us to consider

> how Noongars might feel having their language used in a poem. A language few of us speak fluently, many are regenerating with the help of those who have carried it. And hearing this language 'spoken' publicly by someone who may never have heard it, and has collected it from archival sources with all the difficulties of spelling etc. And how is it for Noongars, that the language 'returns' in this way, in the context of a history of disempowerment and loss and in such a situation, to such an audience… And in the context of well-meaning poems about migrants wanting to belong and aware of injustices, and among – in a sense – possession of place. (Email to Author. "Re: Cultural Protocols" 12 April 2002)

The poem which uses the rare Indigenous language is "In the Presence of a Severed Head". This poem is not unlike other poems by Mateer which feature more than one language. Here Mateer uses the Noongar language in the subtitles: Bal Wenin / He Is Dead (68), My-A-Kowa / Echo (Voice of the Precipice)" (70), Naiji Karnejel Wong / I am Telling the Truth (72), Graro-Djin! / Look Out! (76), Ma-Ri / Lament (79). Scott is correct to assume that Mateer sourced the Noongar language from "archival sources", and almost correct to

assume that Mateer had never heard the language spoken. Mateer states that he "only once heard Noongar spoken, and that was at a public event. From that occasion I got the impression that it was not really a living language. The speaker was very stilted – he was a Noongar elder. It was as if he was speaking an artificial language like Esperanto" ("Re: some questions." Email to Author. 17 Apr. 2002).

Mateer's investigations into the state of the language led him to believe that it was not a "functioning language" ("Re: some questions." Email to Author. 17 Apr. 2002). Considering that the Noongar language is spoken by only a "few" Indigenous Australians, as Scott informs, it would have been very difficult for Mateer to source the language directly from a Noongar elder. However, given the colonial history of banning Aboriginal people from using their Indigenous languages, Scott's claim of Indigenous ownership is an explicable and compelling position for contemporary Indigenous Australians. If non-Indigenous people have no right to the endangered language, might the problem be inherent in the book Mateer sourced the language from?

The book Mateer sourced the Noongar language from was *A Nyoongar Wordlist from the South West of Western Australia* which was compiled and edited by Peter Bindon and Ross Chadwick, and published by the Anthropology Department of the West Australian Museum (1992). Bindon and Chadwick compiled the wordlist from many sources. Some examples include: a series of articles written in 1833 by Robert Menli Lyon who it is believed "acquired his information from Yagan during Yagan's incarceration on Carnac Island" (Green 1979 in Bindon and Chadwick i); Francis Armstrong who "had extensive contact with Aboriginal people through various positions in Government departments and became fluent in local

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Aboriginal languages" (ii); George Grey; George Fletcher Moore; Reverend John Brady; Daisy M. Bates; Edward M. Curr; Dom Rosendo Salvado a "Benedictine monk who co-founded the mission to the Aborigines at New Norcia in 1846" and compiled two wordlists from the "Aborigines who visited or gathered around" the mission (iii); and many others.

This issue of using Aboriginal language in poetry written by non-Indigenous Australians is not a new issue of contention for Australian poetry. The Jindyworobaks of the late 1930s were severely criticised for their use of Aboriginal language, but there are many differences between Mateer's project and the Jindyworobaks'. Most importantly, unlike the diasporic Mateer, these poets were extreme Nationalists driven by the desire for a distinct Australian poetry, separate and free of European influence. Scott's criticism of Mateer's source and lack of connection with any live Nyoongar speaking people, also resonates with the criticism of the Jindyworobaks' source book which was written by James Devaney in 1929:

> the Jindyworobaks' use of *The Vanished Tribes* as a source book points to several weaknesses in their program. As Sellick argues, the title of this book tellingly reveals the Social Darwinist orientation of Devaney, and by implication his followers. Furthermore, the lack of precise linguistic attribution to the 'Aboriginal' language used by Devaney, and adopted by the Jindyworobaks, threatens to disarticulate the reality of Aboriginal language and experience: 'The language itself was "annexed" and an artificial one created. It is for this reason that the "Aboriginality" that they [the Jindyworobaks] created is a fragile one with only a contingent relationship to the reality of both past and present Aboriginality'. (Caesar 162)

Yet the differences between the Jindyworobaks' source book and Mateer's are substantial. Firstly, the sources of Bindon and Chadwick's wordlist (as mentioned above) are much more reputable and reliable than those of Devaney. Secondly, the book was compiled, as the introduction informs, in the hope that it "might encourage a greater interest in Aboriginal languages, and it is our primary hope that Aboriginal people will find it a useful resource" (i). Mateer's use certainly falls into the encouraged interest sector. The wider uses of the book

imply an acceptance and usefulness amongst Nyoongar people: it is held and used by the

Department of Indigenous Affairs' library, it has been supplied to many Nyoongar

communities, regional prisons, and is now a text book on the reading list of the Aboriginal

Studies course at Curtin University (Chadwick, Email to Author. "Re: Nyoongar Wordlist"

15 Oct 2002).

Mateer does not use other languages naively, nor does he underestimate the controversy of

writing poems that engage with Aboriginal culture. On the contrary, he acknowledges that

> the very idea of making work about Nyoongar culture, whether by 'whites' or
> otherwise, is highly problematic. One instance, by way of example: it is considered
> 'shaming' for Nyoongars to go to classes to learn their language because it 'shows
> them up', and hence a white person's use of the language on the other hand outrages
> them because 'it's like stealing from them', and on the other hand, because it reveals
> that the language doesn't necessarily 'belong' to them as it belongs only to those who
> care to use it. . . . for an ex-white-south-African to use their language is even more
> fraught than that. There's three levels of politics involved: the south African, the
> Australian, and the Aboriginal. . . . I recognize its bizarre awkwardness. ("Re:
> objection to The Brewery Site." Email to Author. 19 Mar. 2002)

Mateer's use of the Noongar language resonates with his poetics of hybridity:

> The reason why I used the Nyoongar language in 'In the Presence': it makes the
> reader aware of the presence – prior presence – of another language in this place. It
> also represents the errors and mishearings of actual encounters between the
> 'invaders' and the 'indigenes'. Those mishearings would eventually become the basis
> of historical accounts. By using the Nyoongar language – misusing it you could say –
> the lyrical text presented as a particular kind of language encounter within the
> context of various others . . . establishes a relationship between an 'other'. The
> Nyoongar subtitles and the nature of the address establish a connection to that
> which is not self through the activity of the language act/encounter. ("Re: some
> questions." Email to Author. 17 Apr. 2002)

Like "The Brewery Site" and its desire to connect with another culture via a sacred site,

Mateer's use of the Nyoongar language in "In the Presence of a Severed Head"

demonstrates a form of cultural entanglement that specifically aims towards a relationship

with that other culture. That this relationship is characterised by "mishearings" or failures of

communication, as Ang defines them, emphasises the difficulties imminent to cultural entanglement, of living "togetherness-in-difference" (197).

## **"*Writing Cultures: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Literature*"**

For Scott important Indigenous protocols have been ignored by Mateer; his poetics and politics of hybridity are perceived as disrespectful towards Indigenous Australians. At the time of writing criticism on Mateer's poetry the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council was devising cultural protocols to assist artists in their respectful use of Indigenous cultures. In the hope of obtaining a copy of the cultural protocols with which to better understand Indigenous cultural protocols I contacted new nineties Indigenous poet, Anita Heiss, but was informed that they were still in draft stage. Anita Heiss suggested that I contact Fiona Prince who is the Policy Officer for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board with the Australia Council, and directly involved with the protocols. Fiona Prince advised me that it would be some time before the protocols would be released but said she would like to read Mateer's poems so she could comment on the issue of cultural protocols. I forwarded Prince a copy of the poem, and a few others, to discover that her response was similar to Kim Scott's. For Prince "Talking with Yagan's Head" is "disgusting":

> I think it is very insensitive, as it is a well known fact that Yagan, a well known leader for our people was decapitated. John appears to be searching for spirituality, like a blood sucking flea latched to his 'perception' of Aboriginality and our connections to land.
> I think this poem is an insult to Yagan's memory and Yagan's descendants. There was no warning or disclaimer that this poem spoke of a deceased person. "The poem is morally and culturally inappropriate" ("Re: cultural protocols and poetry." Email to Author. 14 June 2002).

Prince circulated Mateer's poems amongst her colleagues at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board and the responses were equally condemning. From this feedback,

poetry criticism can gain one cultural protocol guideline. That is, like ABC and SBS television, a disclaimer should be offered at the beginning of the poem to warn that a deceased Indigenous person is either mentioned or is the subject matter of the poem. However, Prince's response suggests that this would have been of little assistance in the case of this poem.

In 2002 cultural protocols to assist artists wishing to incorporate Indigenous culture in their art were established and published. The publication is divided into five sections addressing five different art forms: song, visual, performing, new media and writing cultures. *Writing Cultures: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Literature* (Janke with Heiss) is the most useful for poetry criticism because it is specific to literature. *Writing Cultures* is aimed at both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists with the intention of being a "first point of reference in planning a work with Indigenous practitioners, or using Indigenous cultural material" (2). Protocols are defined as "appropriate ways of using Indigenous cultural material, and interacting with Indigenous people and their communities. Protocols encourage ethical conduct and promote interaction based on good faith and mutual respect" (3).

*Writing Cultures* incorporates some of the guidelines of *Our Culture: Our Future – Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property*, a report which "recommended significant changes to legislation, policy and procedures":

> Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights refers to Indigenous people's rights to their cultural heritage.
> Heritage comprises all objects, sites and knowledge – the written nature or use which has been transmitted or continues to be transmitted from generation to generation, and which is regarded as pertaining to a particular Indigenous group or its territory.
> …
> Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights include the right to:

- own and control Indigenous cultural and intellectual property
- ensure that any means of protecting Indigenous cultural and intellectual property is based on the principle of self-determination
- be recognised as the primary guardians and interpreters of their cultures
- authorize or refuse to authorize the commercial use of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property according to customary law
- maintain the secrecy of Indigenous knowledge and other cultural practices
- full and proper attribution
- control the recording of cultural customs and expression, the particular language which may be intrinsic to cultural identity, knowledge, skill, and teaching of culture. (6)

*Writing Cultures* also positions the cultural protocols within an international context:

> Across the world, Indigenous people continue to call for rights at a national and international level. Indigenous people are developing statements and declarations which assert their ownership and associated rights to Indigenous cultural heritage. These statements and declarations are a means of giving the world notice of the rights of Indigenous people. They also set standards and develop an Indigenous discourse that will, over time, ensure that Indigenous people's cultural heritage is respected and protected. (6)

Also incorporated into the cultural protocols is *The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*:

> Indigenous peoples are entitled to the recognition of the full ownership, control and protection of their cultural and intellectual property. They have the right to special measures to control, develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestation, including human and other genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs and visual and performing arts. (Article 29, 7)

*Writing Cultures* also calls upon the authority of The Mataatua Declaration on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights which states that "[A]rtists, writers and performers should refrain from incorporating elements derived from Indigenous heritage into their works without the informed consent of the Indigenous owners" (Article 39, 7). In the regional context *Writing Cultures* calls upon the *Pacific Regional Framework for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture* to state that the

> prior and informed consent of the traditional owners is required to:

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- reproduce or publish the traditional knowledge or expressions of culture
- perform or display the traditional knowledge or expressions of culture in public
- make available online or electronically transmit to the public (whether over a path or a combination of paths, or both) traditional knowledge or expression of culture
- use the traditional knowledge or expression of culture in any other form. (7)

The incorporation of these documents legitimises and increases the validity of *Writing Cultures*. At the core of *Writing Cultures* and all of these documents is the premise that permission from the relevant Indigenous people must be sought before an artist can use any form of Indigenous culture in their work. Thus, without consent from the relevant Indigenous authorities, Mateer's poems do not follow the necessary cultural protocols.

*Writing Cultures* presents itself as a "checklist for your own project or practice" (3). In the following discussion I shall use *Writing Cultures* as a "checklist", incorporating it into my critical framework so as to ascertain whether or not John Mateer's poems follow the cultural protocols. One of the first guidelines of how to use *Writing Cultures* suggests a cultural protocol that is relevant to Mateer: "When you need specific advise (sic) on the cultural issues of a particular group, we recommend you either speak to people in authority, or engage an Indigenous cultural consultant with relevant knowledge and experience" (2). Mateer's poems are relevant to a particular group, those Indigenous people of Western Australia, known as the Noongar people. Mateer did not consult any Noongar people. Perhaps if at the beginning of the relevant poems he was able to write something like, 'these poems were written in consultation with………….. and published with the authority of …………..', Kim Scott, Fiona Prince and her colleagues, may have responded more favourably.

The protocols are "shaped by nine principles":

- Respect
- Indigenous control
- Communication, consultation and consent
- Interpretation, integrity and authenticity
- Secrecy and confidentiality
- Attribution
- Proper returns
- Continuing cultures
- Recognition and protection (8)

"Writing Cultures" provides "ways of actioning these principles" (3), and pages 28-33 explicitly address the issue of "Applying the protocols". The first example of applying one of the protocols is particularly relevant to the reading event at Freemantle Arts Centre Press: "It is important to seek consent from and acknowledge the Indigenous country and custodians at the site of each spoken word performance, launch or literary event, and in the acknowledgment of a published text about a specific Indigenous country" (28). Mateer did not follow this protocol. The second action is equally relevant to Mateer's poems and relates to the principle of Indigenous control: "Indigenous people have the right to control the use and expression of their cultural heritage" and artists are to "[d]iscuss [the] use of Indigenous cultural heritage material with Indigenous people in authority" (29). Again Mateer has not followed the cultural protocols. Of the third principle of communication, consultation and consent, "Writing Cultures" again emphasises that artists are to "[c]onsult with Indigenous people on the use and representation of their Indigenous heritage" (29). Within this principle is the important cultural protocol related to "writing about a deceased person" (30). To follow this cultural protocol it is recommended that artists "speak to the family or clan representatives to seek their permission and consult on issues of representation" (30). This action is pertinent to Mateer's poems about Yagan, the deceased Indigenous warrior, and

again he did not follow the required protocol.  This issue of deceased Indigenous people is raised again within the principle of secrecy and confidentiality:

> **Representation of deceased people**
> - In many Indigenous communities, the reproduction of deceased people's names and images in books is offensive to Indigenous beliefs.
> - Consult with the deceased's family or community so that the appropriate protocols are observed. (31)

Even though Yagan has been deceased for many years these protocols still need to be observed.


The fourth principle raises a number of questions that can be asked of Mateer's poems: "How will your writing affect the Indigenous group it is based on?" and "Does it empower Indigenous people?" (30).  As a "descendant of the Noongar people" of Western Australia (Austlit), Kim Scott belongs to the Indigenous group on whom Mateer's poems are based. Thus, in accordance with the Indigenous cultural protocols document in "Writing Cultures" Kim Scott's responses at the reading and in our discussion are indeed important considerations.  Scott was negatively affected by Mateer's poems:  for him the poems were disrespectful and an insult to Indigenous people, disempowering rather than empowering. When applied as a 'checklist' "Writing Cultures" demonstrates that John Mateer has not followed Indigenous cultural protocols.  Thus, his poems that engage with the different cultures of Indigenous Australians are disrespectful towards the culture they wish to connect with.


## *The Role of Poetry Criticism?*

I have been unable to locate detailed information about the processes involved when an artist, or a publisher on behalf of an artist, follows the cultural protocols and consults the

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relevant Indigenous authorities. This is not surprising given that, as *Writing Cultures* informs, "it is not possible to prescribe universal rules" because of the "diversity and complexity of the many different Indigenous cultures in Australia" (Janke with Heiss 3), as well as the diversity of cases to be considered. However, scattered throughout the other four guides (song, new media, performing, visual) there are some useful points to be considered. For example, in relation to Indigenous language use *Song Cultures* states that "[w]ords or phrases from particular languages should not be used just because they are 'language words'" and "[l]anguage should only be used where its proper meaning is known and where it is used in the proper context" (Quiggan with Milroy 13). *Performing Cultures* recommends consulting two directories, *The Black Book Directory 2000 – Indigenous Arts & Media Directory* and *National Directory of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations* (Quiggan with Enoch 19). *New Media Cultures* informs:

> With regard to the process of obtaining consent:
> - allow time (perhaps more than one meeting) for communication of a proposal
> - allow time for a decision to be made
> - remember that the decision will be made on other bases than the ones brought from outside the community – different types of knowledge operating in Indigenous communities may conflict with the requirements of a project
> - be prepared to take 'no' for an answer (but don't take it personally)
> - respect the views of all factions within a community, and ensure that the consent comes from the appropriate quarter for a particular activity or project (Vynette Wright, email to Terri Janke & Company, 27 May 2002, 12, in (Janke *New Media Cultures: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian New Media*).

In the performance arts the use of Indigenous cultural consultants has proved most effective. However, the field of poetry is quite different from theatre and there needs to be funded to employ an Indigenous cultural consultant. To expect an Indigenous cultural consultant to perform this work without remuneration disregards the cultural protocol, as documented in *Performing Cultures*, that "Indigenous people have the right to be paid for their

contribution" and asks "[h]ave Indigenous cultural advisors been acknowledged and properly remunerated for their contribution?" (Quiggan 43).

In order to make these documents more useful and to achieve their goals, much work needs to be done to assist artists, especially non-Indigenous artists, to follow the guidelines. It is not very productive if rules are established without the proper infrastructure to enable artists to follow them. There will be limited change if artists wanting to obtain permission or consult with Indigenous authorities, do not know whom to approach or how. The establishment of an Indigenous body (or bodies) to assist artists who wish to respect Indigenous protocols is urgently needed.

A vital part of the process of consultation and requesting permission from the appropriate Indigenous authorities will involve reading the poems in question. *Visual Cultures* makes the point that "[c]onsent must be informed. This means that people must be given time and information to consider the requests made of them" (Janke *Visual Cultures: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Visual Arts and Craft* 10). Could poetry criticism be of assistance in this process? Would it be useful if Indigenous and non-Indigenous poetry critics worked together to produce readings that could assist Indigenous authorities to make informed decisions about the poems in question? Poetry criticism for this purpose would need to ask relevant questions, like the ones found in the protocols. For example, *Performing Cultures* asks: "Does it reinforce negative stereotypes?" (42). Although it is too late for Mateer's poems, as the cultural protocols advise permission must be sought before publication, critical readings of poems may be able to assist Indigenous authorities.

Following is a discussion of "In the Presence of a Severed Head" one of the poems that Scott and Prince objected to.

"In the Presence of a Severed Head" commences with an introduction to the subject matter via a quote from Neville Green's *Broken Spears: Aboriginals and Europeans in the Southwest of Australia*:

> Of the many Aborigines who courageously resisted European settlement, most have now been forgotten, their deeds surviving only briefly in the oral epics sung by their tribal groups around campfires. The legend of Yagan is preserved because of the interest shown by three settlers: Charles McFaull, the editor of the *Perth Gazette*, who made his name a household word throughout the colony; George Fletcher Moore, the Advocate General, whose published journal provided a professional view of Yagan's character; and Robert Lyon, a mystic with complex and confused motives wavering between genuine sympathy, imperialistic idealism and theological nonsense, who saw Yagan as the epitome of the Noble Savage . . .

> The legend of Yagan did not end along the banks of the Swan River. The head, brutally hacked from his body, was wedged into a hollow tree stump and slowly preserved in the smoke of gum leaves. After several months the lank hair was combed, a band of possum string was wrapped around the forehead and a pair of red and black cockatoo feathers added for effect. Ensign Robert Dale acquired the trophy and took it to England where it was exhibited as the head of a Swan River Valley Chieftain.

There is no warning or disclaimer to readers that this is a poem about a deceased Indigenous figure.

The poem is addressed to Yagan, as the first page demonstrates:

> Yagan,

> even if I stab a redgum you will not speak.

> Yagan,

> the tree doesn't say, *Once I married the earth to the sky.*
> And its branches don't say, *Once we sang to the wind.*

The address is like a prayer, referred to within the poem as a "hymn" (73), spoken to Yagan the holy "avatar" (71). The subject who addresses Yagan is the "alien" "poet" who "learnt that your head, / no longer in a museum, was buried in a commoner's grave / with the stillborn" (73). Predominantly the poem is the story of Yagan: his death (Bal Wenin / He is Dead 69), the shipping of Yagan's head to England "exhibited as a trophy at which subjects could gawp", the location of Yagan's head in a "commoner's grave / with the stillborn" (Naiji Karnijel Wong / I am Telling the Truth 73). In section four, Graro-Djin! / Look Out!, the poem moves away from retelling the story of Yagan to present something of the speaking voice's perspective or attitude:

> Yagan,
>
> without you the city is a ruin of broken glass
> like bottlenecks cemented along a decaying wall
>
> without you the river at night is an opencast mine
> where dreams are pornographic and reconciliation is fire
>
> without you the bankrupt are heroes and news crews historians
> because even your elders are suffering aphasia
>
> without you this voice fears few will notice
> that poems, memorials and new constitutions are our sorrybooks unsigned

Here the speaking voice laments the loss of Yagan. The importance of this loss is emphasised formally by the repetition of "without you" and the constant rhythm creates a chant-like effect. "Without you" does not only refer to the absence of Yagan himself, but to the absence of recognition of his sacredness. For as the previous page demonstrates absence can have a positive effect:

> Yagan,
>
> a poet once, the apostate, she who'd abandoned the convent,
> told her lover that years before, when kneeling
> on the bone-chilling stone floor of a crypt in France,

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praying to the Virgin within sight of a saint's relic,
she awoke to a clarifying absence
and almost asked herself:

*What am I doing here, on my knees, before a brown severed head?*

Thus, the power of your absence. (77)

This story is ambiguous because there seems little relationship between the saint's relic and Yagan's head, unless they are one and the same which is not likely as Yagan has not been deemed a saint by the church. More likely the nun recognises the hypocrisy of a church that worships relics and recognises the sacredness of their own but cannot acknowledge or recognise the relics of a different culture. In this case the absence of Yagan has a power of its own because it clarifies the way the church excludes the sacred beliefs of other cultures. "In the Presence of a Severed Head" is a prayer to Yagan, and like a prayer it is a form of worship or holy address, a celebration of his greatness and a lament that too many do not recognise his sacredness.

In the following section the speaker of the poem attends to his relationship with Yagan:

Yagan,

like the sooty tuning-fork prongs of trees after bushfire,
you, to whom these words are spoken, are silence.

Addressed through this sub-vocal song you are
more intimate than prayer, closer than flesh.

Yagan,

there was a dream in which your skull
and your skeleton were laid in state
and there were indistinguishable mourners queuing
to glimpse you before the thieves' arrival. (78)

Through this "sub-vocal song" the speaker can feel Yagan's silent sacredness; he can connect with Yagan in the same way those in a church sing hymns to God to connect with his spirit. The speaker wishes through a dream for recognition of Yagan by laying him (skull and skeleton rejoined) in state.

The poem concludes with a section entitled, Ma-Ri / Lament, in which Yagan is the "blackhole of words for which the prime minister / may apologise with these poems" (80). Twice this idea of a poem as a form of apology to Yagan (and by implication Indigenous Australians) arises ("poems, memorials and new constitutions are our sorrybooks unsigned" 77). My reading of this poem suggests that much respect is shown towards Yagan and by implication, Indigenous cultures and peoples.

Not all Indigenous people support an assumption of authoritative Indigenous power. My discussion about this matter with one of Mateer's contemporaries, new nineties Indigenous poet Samual Wagan Watson, revealed that not all Indigenous people necessarily have the right to say what a non-Indigenous poet can include in their poetry. (Sam Wagan Watson's collections include: *Itinerant Blues*; *Hotel Bone*; *Of Muse, Meandering and Midnight*; *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*; *Three Legged Dogs and Other Poems* and *Blackfellas Whitefellas Wetlands: Poetry and Music from Boondall Wetlands*, an audio disc with Brett Dionysius and Liz Hall-Downs.) As a non-Indigenous poetry critic I am aware that I am in a precarious position, but I also acknowledge that these issues are too important to be shied away from and whether I stimulate further debate or aggravate hostile response the risk is a necessary one.

When I asked Sam Wagan Watson if he was interested in discussing Mateer's poetry and the matters Kim Scott had discusses, he offered this reply:

> Kim Scott's comments concern me…I've even drawn criticism from him as he believed my poetry was not as confronting as it should be… […] I just want to write…I grew up in a political environment, my father was a 'black panther' in the 60's and 70's, and it was not uncommon for the police to turn up at home and take Dad for questioning whenever they wanted…but I don't hate them for that…I have a beautiful little boy and I'm trying hard not to hate anything or harbor animosity for what has happened in the past. I know of John Mateer's work…I respect him and his writing (thank you for the extracts)…and Kim probably has a good point, but him co-winning a Miles Franklin award doesn't give him the authority to tell us what to think or how to debate… […] John Mateer is not trying to belong to the world that Kim Scott so graciously wants to protect…even though Kim only offered 'his perspective and concerns in the spirit of conversation', maybe he should consider offering something in the spirit of reconciliation?
>
> […] I'm a writer, and yes, I have Aboriginal ancestry in my veins – but that does not give me argumentative concessions over the content of what a non-Indigenous writer chooses to use. ("Re: Initiating Discussion." Email to Author. 20 Apr. 2002)

My discussion with Scott revealed that he did possess a degree of ambivalence about his authority. He commented that in his "discussion with John my intention was not 'nay-saying' but just to allow some space for consideration of how Noongars might feel having their language used in a poem" ("Re: Cultural Protocols." Email to Author. 12 Apr. 2002). However, as he raised his objections against Mateer's poems in a public space, in front of an audience, one would assume Scott acted in such a way because he believes he possesses the authority to question Mateer on these issues. In later discussions Scott explicitly rejected any claim to authority: "I don't wish to be positioned as a Noongar authority", adding that his objections were "more in the way of offerings. Enlightenment even? As an Indigenous writer those situations are extremely awkward to be in. And I feel like a traitor if I don't 'object' " ("Re: quoting you." Email to Author. 16 Apr. 2002). Scott's comments emphasise that he felt it was his duty as an Indigenous Australian to raise these objections. In this instance, Scott can be understood to speak from a doubly authoritative position: he speaks

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not only as an Indigenous Australian but as an established literary figure because he is a Miles Franklin Award winner. He thus feels he has the authority to speak on behalf of other Indigenous Australians about what is acceptable or not for Australian literature.

## Incommensurable Politics: Indigenous Politics and a Politics of Hybridity

An extreme disjunction between the two different forms of politics operating in contemporary Australia are revealed in the clash between Mateer's poetry and Indigenous readings of his poetry. Is this disjunction the incommensurability Ang writes of in her discussion of a poetics of hybridity? Ang does draw attention to the position of Australian Aborigines in relation to a politics of hybridity, stating that for some Indigenous Australians hybridity stands for "'racial' disappearance" (196). She warns that "today an uncritically celebratory endorsement of hybridity is prematurely to undercut contemporary indigenous identity politics" and yet "we cannot, in fact, escape the predicament of hybridity as a real, powerful and pervasive force in a world in which togetherness-in-difference is the order of the day" (197). However, nor can we escape the predicament of Indigenous politics as a real, powerful and pervasive force in this same world at the same time, and yet, as the situation between Mateer and Scott demonstrates, the two types of politics are profoundly at odds with one another but at present both co-exist. Poetry criticism can be useful by acknowledging these conflicts of cultures and politics, not by attempting to solve the problems but by creating space for the conflict to be presented. At this stage of our histories there seems little more that poetry criticism can do than be like Mateer's poetry and "make us realize how riven with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict" cultural encounters can be (Ang 16-17). The publication of the cultural protocol documents

is an attempt to prevent "miscommunication and intercultural conflict", but unless artists know how to follow or how to act upon the protocols there will be limited change.

## *Conclusion*

John Mateer's poetics is driven by the important and complex issues of cultural difference. Whether defined as postmodern or post-colonial, Mateer's poetry demands to be considered in relation to issues of cultural difference. Certainly Mateer's aesthetics can be discussed in relation to postmodern aesthetic practices, but these must be considered within the broader context of cultural difference. His focus on how different cultures relate or do not relate, as is often the case, is concerned with the way these processes constitute subjectivity. Mateer works with a hybrid sense of subjectivity which is constructed by the different cultures both within and without the subject. Mateer's personal identity as a white South African, non-Indigenous Australian and his experience of not 'belonging' to the environment he lives in, inform an engagement with issues of cultural difference that are relevant to many people today. The desire to connect with, share and understand the Indigenous cultures of Australia is part of the reconciliation process between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. However, as the response of some Indigenous people demonstrates, *how* this is performed is more important than its enactment. If an artist does not follow the cultural protocols established by Indigenous people, the reconciliatory intention becomes appropriation – the 'novel ways' of a postmodern ethics become the old ways of the colonial past – and the different cultures once again clash and collide in disharmony. Mateer's poems reveal that connection with the non-Indigenous cultures of Australia will not be created with the use of a phrase book or the use of Indigenous language. His poems do not reveal how to successfully connect with another culture but they do emphasise that the path towards

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relationship is fraught with difficulty. This acknowledgment is vital and it is a necessary part of the process of living together-in-difference. It may be all that is possible at the present stage of our history. With this in mind, the next stage is to follow the directions of the cultural protocols established by Indigenous peoples and seek those Indigenous peoples who are able to assist with the sharing of their culture.

# CHAPTER 4
## "dark bare death's speaking human words"
## "But the poems are beautiful":
## Emma Lew's Dark and Violent Poetry

### Introduction

Emma Lew's first two collections offer some of the most dark and violent poems of all new nineties poetry. Lew consistently focuses on violent subject matter such as murder, war, violent relationships between men and women, criminals, murderers, drug addicts, fallen women, and the imagery and tone is threatening and frequently mysterious. Given that the twentieth century has been defined as a "violent century" marked by "nuclear and biological warfare, concentration camps, and multiple genocides" (Steger and Lind xiv), it is not surprising that violence is a predominant issue for Lew and other new nineties poets. The 1990s and the end of the twentieth century have not brought an end to violence; on the contrary, this period is marked by more violence due to the "emergence of new conflicts arising from the effects of globalization, ethnonationalism, religious fundamentalism, and international terrorism" (xiii).

> Rather than sailing smoothly into a new century of rational concord, we continue to find ourselves enmeshed in a net of violence stitched together by crime, war, environmental degradation, and the unequal distribution of material resources. Threatened by the human capacity to unleash previously unimaginable means of violence, the very future of the world hangs in the balance. Indeed, the ominous escalation of violence on both the interpersonal and the global level represents one of the central social and political challenges for the dawning twenty-first century. (xiii)

In Australia "[v]iolence permeates all life" (National Committee on Violence xvii), and although it is "a less violent place today than it was during the period from its establishment as a penal colony until Federation . . . it is more violent than it was before the second World War" (3). Lew and other new nineties poets focus on the issues of

violence that are relevant to contemporary society at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

New nineties poets are concerned with violence in relation to various topics including domestic violence, racism and the violence of clashing cultures, genocide and massacres, war, animal cruelty, environmental abuse, childbirth, illness, and death.  Some poems concerned with domestic violence include Lisa Bellear's "Love's Polished Floor" (*Untreated* 6) and "Break the Cycle" (*Dreaming in Urban Areas* 69), Coral Hull's "The Black Gun",  "The Noise that the House Made" (*How Do Detectives Make Love?* 30-40, 100-104), and "At Night" (*William's Mongrels* 207-208), Catherine Bateson's "Saying Goodbye" (*Divan*), Sarah Attfield's "Mercy" (*Gathering Force* 20), Andrea Sherwood's "Natural Disasters" (*One Siren or Another* 60), Brendan Ryan's "Why I Am Not a Farmer" (*Ulitarra* 16-17), and Aileen Kelly's "Assertiveness for Women" (*Coming Up For Light* 31).  Those concerned with genocide and massacre include Lisa Bellear's "Genocide" (*Untreated* 7), Romaine Moreton's "Forgive and Forget" and "Genocide is Never Justified" (*The Callused Stick of Wanting* 27, 31-32).  The violence of clashing cultures is a predominant issue for new nineties Indigenous poets, including Lisa Bellear and Romaine Moreton, and it is also a major topic in the poetry of migrant Australians, including John Mateer and Ouyang Yu.  As is to be expected, the violence of war is a predominant issue in poems about the Holocaust, and the poetry of Holocaust survivor Jacob Rosenberg and Ian McBryde's exploration of the Holocaust in *Domain*, offer some of the most poignant poems on this topic.

Of all the new nineties poetry, Emma Lew's is the most pervaded by violence, fear and anguish.  Both Lew's first and second collections include violent poems about the Holocaust and war generally: in her first collection, *The Wild Reply*, the woman in

"Berschtesgaden" "tells a strange story of Hitler's love of astrology / She saw Goebbels with a red weal on his face / She says Hess is an addict of heroin / And says of Himmler *He still suffers from the effects of / venereal disease contracted when he was only / a lad of twenty*" (8); in "Trench Music" there is "Dancing with the bones of the lamb / near that delicate Stalingrad" (20);   in *Anything the Landlord Touches* the speaker of "Snow and Gold" belongs to a "troupe" which follows on the "heels of the army" (30-31); in "Red", with its epigraph by Lenin, those at war leave their "machines / at night, and everywhere hidden wires had /only to be touched" (52); in "Pocket Constellations" "men with amputated limbs" arrive "on numberless lorries" after being "shelled all day" (54-55); in "Fine Weather of the Siege" the "guards had fled", "a soldier hid behind / a horse's corpse" (63-65).   Lew's poems focus on violent and dangerous journeys, fearful characters encounter murderers or are murderers themselves, others are fleeing from some known or unknown threat: the criminal in "The Recidivist" loves the "haunted moment / when night refills with fresh blood" and admits *"I've done it. I do it. I'll do it again"* (56); in "Evolutions of Rogues" "Thieves have emptied out our piggy banks / And made off with an errand boy's great gift to the world" and "Anything terrible has already happened" (45); in "Prey" the speaker "was daydreaming about wiping out the whole school", and has "killed a young bride" (82); in "Mythic Bird of Panic" "memory has more real blood / Than ever ran in beefy dreams" (6); "Cheap Silhouette" portrays a "reality [which] is / washing scalps" and "The question is: / can I hurt you / enough?" (9); in "Message" "I picture the athletes of my day /carved up like melons" (15); a man in "Latecomer" stakes "out Satan's lost ground / to swindle us of our eyes and souls" (19); those on the run in  "Broken Coast" are safe because their "scent's too cold now / for dogs to trace" (21); a soul in "The Understudy" is a "black sea of dots and shadows" (52); the speaker of "Famous Vexations" is "pushed towards evil" (32); in "Jasmine" a woman is trapped in a house by the ghosts of her family (43), and the speaker of

"Cornfield School" states "I have seen a man hanged, / now I wish to see one burned" (62). Working in conjunction with the violent subject matter are the consistently dark imagery and foreboding tones of Lew's poems. Frequently set in the dark of night, shadows and greyness help to establish the eerie tone: the subject is "caught behind my shadow" and "walking in evil" ("Praise Report" 61); it is on a winter's evening, "towards midnight" when "it would come over him" ("A Patient Carpentry" 60); it is the "grey dawn", the "sun set like a guillotine", the "moon grew grave", and "the shadows / were a straggler" ("Fine Weather of the Siege" 63-65); a child is born "named" and "feared" in the "heat in dark spaces", in the "night that tears" and the "black snake" circles ("Plantain" 67); "We see but one night", it is "now growing darker", "It is just after midnight" ("Riot Eve" 68); "Death closes down a theatre" and the male subject "clothed her in slanting shadows" ("Rice" 71); the "photograph accepts the dark truth" ("My Illusion of the Tycoon" 73); children ask questions "about the darkness" ("Light Tasks" 58); there is the "perfection of night" ("Passage" 56); "Darkness tied up the bells of our troikas. / It snowed a little in the night" ("The Stopping Place" 48); "The night can touch something of yours" ("Thirty Versts" 49); "it's still night" ("Sinking Song" 47); "We loved the nights" ("Loquax Ludi" 46); the "burdens of his head / were scattered on the night / that slow rain fell" ("Blemishes" 42); there is a "black wind" and "The moon happily displays its scars" ("Jasmine" 43); they "wrap up their shoulders in grey light" ("Marshes" 13); a "Black shadow" ("The Peaks" 14-15); "grey light" ("Perhaps the Travellers" 18); "Past-midnight is never-ending" ("Fine White Hands" 87); "Darkness mixed with fire causes night" ("Nous" 89); there is "dark magic" "on Saturday night" ("Theory of the Leash" 83) (all poems from *Anything the Landlord Touches*); "the darkness of trees", "Give until the colour black ends" ("Afterlife" 2); "They will be making snow tonight" ("Holes and Stars" 5); "near-black light" ("The Way out of Hungary" 22); "midnight breeze" ("Accountancy" 25); "It is evening. / The landscape twitches / the

way a lunatic waves goodbye" ("New Moon" 31); "Shadow grabs the nettle" ("Pond"

32); "deft night / decants the last colours" ("The Last Colours" 33).  Lew's poems are

frequently set during the dark of night, and as the following poem demonstrates, the

night setting creates an eerie feeling of unknown but impending danger:

> Words for Night
>
> Night comes blind,
> like patience burning,
> like words precise as silence,
> whispering to confuse.
>
> Soft like sand and dying stars,
> words woken on the edge of night
> are whispering into worlds
> the softness of their sinking.
>
> Night moves like a shadow's sense,
> struggling mothwise up from the dust,
> shaping its hows and merest dreamings,
> murmuring into the skin.
>
> Out of the night's moody mouth,
> the grey hours grow like terrible words,
> burning whiter than savage light
> in the sleeve of a wilder sky.
>
> There is an opium of the night,
> epic, luminous, wayward –
> a sad, striving moon
> lost in what is whispered.
>
> There is no sea but the dying sea
> swelling like a thing that breathes,
> so deeply in the ebbing dark
> as the night perfects itself.
>
> In soft provinces of aching dark
> words fall like heavy hands
> in places where the dead who dream
> prepare for the infinities. (*The Wild Reply* 34)

Within this poem are the reccurring images of Lew's oeuvre: night and darkness, fire and

burning, silence and whispering, death, shadows, dust, dreams, the moon.

Whether described as uncanny, surreal, or simply strange, Lew's poems present an abnormal world: they are filled with blood ("Fine Weather of the Siege" 63, "Mythic Bird of Panic" 6), ghosts and spirits ("Marshes" 13, "Fine White Hand" 87); people in trances ("Coal" 51), séances ("Procedure" 3), and madness ("Holes and Stars" 5, "Caught in the Act of Admiring Myself" 13). In "City of Light" the narrator "want[s] you to sleep / and dream beautiful dreams" but these are surreal, dark dreams where "you fly black-winged / like a cruising hearse" (55). In "Cartouche", Africa is described as the "horns of the moon" filled with "barbarous trees / wreathing their roots, / and crocodiles" are strangely described as "sticky, [and] glittering" (54), and in "Thebes" there is a mysterious howling in a "Ghost town", and an equally strange "dark / charge of doors and / the lake that burns", all this is set in the "Stormlight and the / coming-on of night" (50). The first line of "The Clover Seed Hex" is certainly strange and surreal, "Once my foot was like a cube of sugar". In the strange world of Lew's poetry everything is out of kilter.

Although Lew shares with her contemporaries a preoccupation with violence, hers is an "entirely distinctive voice", as Chris Wallace-Crabbe states in his *Age* review. This is in part due to the pervasiveness of violence and the strangeness of Lew's world, but it is also due to her unusual style of poetry which can be described as emotionally charged dramatic lyrics or psychological narratives, and parodic ventures. Gig Ryan defines Lew's unique style as the "New Mannerist style" (*HEAT* 237), and while this title is generally appropriate for all of Lew's poems, it most accurately describes the parodic ventures. These two modes are not mutually exclusive as both contain elements of each other: the psychological narratives are often parodic and ironic, and the 'New Mannerist' styled poems are often concerned with the inner workings of the characters (although they are often less concerned with violence than the psychological narratives). Ryan's description

of Lew's poetry as the new mannerist style draws attention to the way Lew rejects any attempt to produce a 'natural' looking poetry; Lew's new mannerist style is characterised by artifice or "contrivances of art" (237). As Ryan suggests, Lew is not interested in "pleading her sincerity or the blistering truth or hardship of *genuine* experiences"; she is interested in building a poem that is a "monument of words like a pyramid, a beautifully constructed object, the words fitting together in an unexpected array, each word drawing attention to itself, packed with amusing non sequiturs and imperious imperatives" (233-234). A mannerist style includes the "affected or excessive use of a particular style", and a style "heavily dependent on overly elaborate or ingenious ornamentation in tropes and syntax" (Preminger et al. 732). It is a type of poetry that draws attention to its style. Marjorie Perloff comments on this return of the artifice in her discussion of postmodern poetry: "the demand for a *natural* and *transparent* poetry (Pound's famous "direct treatment of the thing"), a demand that was the cornerstone of modernism, has given way, for reasons unclear, to the *artifice* one associates, not with a robust modernism, but with the nineteenth-century fin-de-siecle" (*Radical Artifice* xi). Excessiveness is frequently created in Lew's poems through the voices of the well-travelled parodic narrators, as in "Light Tasks" in which the narrator humorously and absurdly comments: "I arrived in bits, / furious at Copenhagen" and "The cabbage was marvellous. / Oh! If only I were dressed better!" (57). The female narrator of "The Clover Seed Hex", whose "foot was like a cube of sugar", parodically states that

> Men are never afraid. They know everything
> not like women, and in other ways
> we have taken their hardness. A woman
> has to be fine and weak. He loves her tears. (25)

The narrator of "Famous Vexations" ironically seems less concerned about being "pushed towards evil" than being pushed towards evil in her "most beautiful attire" (32). Affected women are parodically and excessively portrayed: "She believed every dumb

line she ever had to say. / She swanned in voluminous crinoline", "Some part of her would always be twitching, / and she'd break up long words / because she liked the air moving" ("Fast" 37); "Which reminds me: do you like dogs, / or can't you?  I infinitely prefer / the smallest hour, and the evenings, / when I always change into nice clothes" (the parodically titled "Beloved Jug of Cream" 38); women whose stories are "very pink, very gilt and grandiose" espouse their "highest hopes – to live / as softly hummed, to hammer / wisdom through the walls, to be / lulled by walk and endless sun" ("Loquax Ludi" 46).  The following poem demonstrates this excessive, ornate, affected, and often parodic style:

> Honour-Bound
>
> Our peaches and apples had
> just ascended and we were
> on the very verge of whispering.
> Consider what unfolded to the slow march rhythms
> in the rooms attractive with
> country furniture, when we
> thought we might run our hands
> over the wainscoting, and
> the lesson was interrupted
> by rage and lust.  How small
> we became – unknowable,
> as when the cats settled on us
> to purr; whereas in truth
> there was not a prayer
> we would let slip, and nothing
> in the world mattered so much
> as porcelain bowls
> and the priceless hair of those
> unyielding, secretive girls.
> We were alive, we devoured,
> rehearsing melancholia
> on the stairs, heads slightly
> bent, as if from too much
> reading, or ravaging, in all our
> delicate footwear and
> billowing sleeves. You were
> lithe-limbed, you seemed
> aware of the sunlight's
> fragility, the terror holding back
> the curtains – as if the real
> body lay there to be awakened,

at midnight, when we were

so defenceless. (*Anything the Landlord Touches* 44-45)

This sexually charged poem, with its "attractive" "country furniture", caressing hands, "rage and lust", purring cats, "unyielding, secretive girls", "ravaging", and "lithe-limbed" bodies, could be set in the sexually suppressed nineteenth-century. The speaker, dressed in "delicate footwear and / billowing sleeves", fits the character of a Victorian rake whose every action ("rehearsing melancholia") is a self-conscious performance and frequently intended to seduce. The narration of the poem is also presented as a performance, the character addressing his audience with "Consider what unfolded". As this phrase indicates, the language and phrasing belongs to a period more like the nineteenth century than the twentieth century. The frivolous concerns of the speaker (and the aristocracy) are parodically presented: "nothing / in the world mattered so much / as porcelain bowls / and the priceless hair". Typical of Lew's poetry is a tone of dark foreboding and a sense of danger undercutting the playfulness of the poem: there is "terror", men who have "devoured" women, a "defenceless" "body" likely to be attacked at the dark time of "midnight".

## Postmodern Aesthetic Practices

Despite being dramatic and psychological narratives, Lew's poems are frequently difficult and confound straightforward reading strategies. Whereas narratives are not usually difficult to understand because they conventionally follow a "sequence of events or facts . . . whose disposition in time implies causal connections and point" (Preminger et al. 814), Lew's poems confound such order. In this sense they are more like anti-narratives than narratives. Lew's postmodern aesthetic practices challenge conventional reading patterns which rely on sequential and linear development because the narratives are discontinuous and fragmented; their movement is disjunctive and erratic. Joseph Conte's

discussion of postmodern serial form differentiates between conventional narrative and postmodern narrative, between "serial form and sequential form":

> Narrative discourse endeavours to create the illusion of movement that is both linear and continuous. When we praise such writing for the progression of its terms toward some conclusion, we use such phrases as 'seamless logic' or 'smooth transition.' The movement of the serial poem, however, is curvilinear and disjunctive. It generates a centrifugal force, which is always directed away from a central axis . . .
> The series expresses its structure as a set of tangencies. Each contiguous part (or metonym) on the poetic line, aware of its antecedent and consequent links, implies a contextual whole. But the intersection of these contexts will be small, and frequently they will meet only at discrete points. (*Unending Design* 23)

Lew's poems follow tangents rather than details of an event. One stanza does not follow another in linear progression, nor in many instances does one line follow another in linear progression. There are numerous examples of disjunction between lines in Lew's poems: (poems from *Anything the Landlord Touches)* the first two lines of "Sinking Song", "You, me, money and fear - / the rings of planets through our hands." (47); from "Blemishes", "His interior is seamless, / the front of his brain / is whole. When snow lies / on him, he is a pale bear." (42); second stanza of "Thirty Versts", "The procession on the streets with the carpet / and the candles. This monogram I have stamped on the paper with a thing. / The oddly shaped eyes of the stately women. / Your power was tremendous, it was like dust" and the concluding stanza, "But the Irtysh is long since frozen over, / the imagination is clear and impure. / I have no fever, which baffles and angers. / A light which drives my thoughts towards rain." (49); "Passage" commences "Papa may have ceased his wanderings / My country is this small plain between rain and wind" (56); the first stanza of "Light Tasks", "I arrived in bits, / furious at Copenhagen. / The swans were stretching their necks and biting. / The donkeys stumbled badly on the descent." (57); (poems from *The Wild Reply)* the first stanza of "Afterlife", "The whisper of a heavy car. / The darkness of trees and behind the darkness. / The pipe, the cool hills and the man. / Things you only buy once in a life time." (2); "The

Understudy", "My god, what have I done / that I must lie down all my life? / Ten simple

kites fly into the air." (52) and "The Wild Reply", "Why do I dream? / Flame speaks and

sings / The great barn burns / Mirage creeps in" (53). The entire poem, "The Stopping

Place", is composed of disjunctive sentences:

> Darkness tied up the bells of our troikas.
> It snowed a little in the night and in the broth.
> Tender love and then the iron. The mastiff,
> off her leash. The violent widow also came
> to nothing. Yet the strain: it was as if the silence
> could do no harm. And the Heir Apparent
> was obviously burning. What if they had come
> and started rifling through our things,
> and found silhouettes? (*Anything the Landlord Touches* 48)

In "Sheraton Evening" the narrating subject informs us in the first line, "I am a

businessman – ", in stanza three he asks "how to define this desire / before retiring to

my suite / to lie lung up in my last bath?" and replies with disjunctive lines in the

concluding stanza four:

> Here's how:
> The river runs both ways.
> The world does move.
> For a ten-horse sacrifice
> it blows your hair back. (*Anything the Landlord Touches* 85)

In the "Story of the Ornament" there seems no relation between the man (in line three)

who "prepares the document and sends a messenger with a list" and the following line

(line four), "The fine wine is pure and the sons of the elder brother are / facing east.",

nor do these lines develop the rest of the poem which focuses on the "concubine"

(*Anything the Landlord Touches* 29). "Famous Vexations" is composed of disjunctive lines:

> Water, wind, morning.
> It is fragrant.
> Just think, I again dream.
> All words become pale.
> There are treasures to be taken
> away from this country.
> The palette darkens.
> Here is my plan. (*Anything the Landlord Touches* 32)

Lew's poetry is extremely fragmentary and disjunctive.

However, lines and stanzas are not arbitrarily unrelated. For example, in "Snow and Gold" the poem commences with a situation and an event, "So, on the heels of the army, our troupe moved", and the second line does not sequentially follow with information about the army or the troupe, but veers off on another tangent, "I gave birth in the street and night nailed the great city / to the earth" ("Snow and Gold" *Anything the Landlord Touches* 30). The second line is not unrelated to the first line because the poem's subject matter is the harsh life of the narrating subject: we know she is a member of the troupe following the army, gives birth in the street, is stalked by the "plague", talks with a "strange woman" who is the wife of her lover, has "dressed" "sores", sees "frightening scenes", plays a string instrument (stanza four) and sings "like a log covered with ice" (stanza five), travels eastward in a wagon "through the black country", is starving (stanza five), had the strength of a "shadow", "tossed down coal" for the train, has a "harsh" father, has "fine snow" like hands. All of these things relate to the narrating subject, but they do not form a sequential narrative that has a climax or develops into a satisfying denouement. There are so many untold details that leave space for the reader to fulfil: is the army keeping order during the devastation of the plague? is this the plague that devastated Europe between 1347 and 1350? does the woman have to give birth in the street because the hospitals are full of sick people? does the "strange woman" come to tell the narrating subject of the husband/lover's death? why are they journeying, first on foot, then on wagons, then on trains? what does the subject's father have to do with the events of the poem and how do her fine snow like hands reproach his harshness and stupidity? Although the specific details of this dramatic narrative are absent and some details seem arbitrary to the narrative, the poem effectively portrays a life ravaged by death and disease. And despite the "stalking" plague, the death of a loved one, the

encroaching winter and the harshness of this life, the narrating subject is not lost in devastation for she is able to recognise the glittering "trinkets", to see the positive within the negative. If there is a satisfying conclusion to this poem it is to be found within the strength of the narrating subject.

## Reception

Considering that Lew's poetry is unusually difficult and unconventional, it is not surprising that her poetry has received mixed responses. Demonstrative of a positive reception are the various awards Lew's poetry has been granted. *Anything the Landlord Touches* was awarded the Arts Queensland Judith Wright Calanthe Prize for Poetry (2003) and the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, the C J Dennis Prize for Poetry (2003). It was shortlisted for the *Age* Book of the Year Award, Dinny O'Hearn Poetry Prize (2003), the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry (2003), and the Festival Awards for Literature (SA), John Bray Award for Poetry (2004). *The Wild Reply* was awarded the Mary Gilmore Award for a first book of poetry (Association for the Study of Australian Literature 1998) and was joint winner (with Peter Porter) of the prestigious *Age* Book of the Year Award, Dinny O'Hearn Poetry Prize (1997). Both collections have been positively reviewed in various influential literary journals and newspapers including *HEAT, Poetry Review, Australian Women's Book Review, Southerly, Overland, Australian Book Review, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age,* and *The Australian.* Reviewers include highly regarded poets and critics like Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Gig Ryan, Geoff Page, Alan Wearne, Martin Duwell and Peter Pierce. Wallace-Crabbe applauds Lew's poetry and recommends that "[a]nybody interested in contemporary poetry should read *Anything the Landlord Touches*" ("A Haunting, Modern Voice for the Old World"). Wearne states that "Lew is as formidable a new Australian poet as any in the nineties" and, drawing attention to the aesthetics of cool that operates

in Lew's poetry, proposes that "[w]ere she a writer of prose fiction (damn refuge of the contemporary over-rated) she would be in line for a call from *Vogue* or *The Good Weekend*, pleased to announce her appointment as the latest fad goddess" ("Murray and Other Rivers" 43). Gig Ryan, who selected *The Wild Reply* as the joint winner of the *Age* Poetry Book of the Year Award in 1997, comments that Lew's poetry is a "blast of fresh air compared to much contemporary poetry" ("The New Mannerism" 233). Duwell's *Australian* review concludes that Lew's is "a brilliant first book". Pierce's *Sydney Morning Herald* review suggests that *Anything the Landlord Touches* is "one of the best two or three books of Australian poetry I have encountered this year" and he "hope[s] it is not five more years before Lew again gathers herself into print". Page's *Canberra Times* review is mixed in response: he comments that he does not completely agree with my enthusiastic entry in *The Who's Who in Twentieth-Century World Poetry* (187), but nor does he agree with Patrick McCauley's *Quadrant* excoriations (which I will discuss in detail). Ultimately Page declares that Lew "makes the cut" because, according to the criterion that "most books are as successful as their handful of best poems", there are a number of "very accomplished" poems.

Lew's contemporaries have favourably received her poetry. Tracey Ryan in *Poetry Review* emphasises the daring and unusual aspects of Lew's poetry, commenting that "it is exciting to find a first book that immediately strikes out in its own direction/s rather than playing it safe" (100). Ian McBryde's *Sidewalk* review refutes those reviewers who suggest "some of the poems don't work due to a vagueness of intent, or a lack of actual 'subject matter'" concluding with comments as eloquent as the poems he praises:

> Lew's poetry, often by the nature of its (only seemingly) scattered arrangement, produces an unsettling, elegant disquiet which can remain with the reader long after the book has been put down.

> If you have not yet read *The Wild Reply*, do so and be swept into Lew's world of drowned jewels and the celebration of dust. Oh yes, and bring the negatives. (77)

MTC Cronin's *Cordite* review luxuriates in Lew's "poems of the surreal, landscapes of dream and fantasy". Like McBryde, Cronin rebuffs those who 'charge' Lew with "obscurity", suggesting the poems provide readers with challenging delights and while

> they ask much of readers unfamiliar with poetry, or, even those after a yarn . . . It is this play with meaning – not of particular words and sentences, but of the poem as a whole living organism – by stretching and challenging predictability, that makes for vigorous poetry.

Cronin celebrates the challenges Lew offers:

> These are poems that can be read and read again and again, which if nothing else makes the book great value for money. Unlike simple narratives, mapped out in advance and inexorably unfurling toward an expected end, Lew's poems engage the reader directly with the creation of meaning. Rather than act as empty vessels waiting to be filled by the reader's predictions, the content of these poems . . . are always open to the pleasure of interpretation. They seem to hold something different every time they are read.

Rather than perceive this as a problem Cronin considers it "to be the essence of writing, that tracing of the mystery of 'being human' ".

However, there is evidence in the negative responses to Lew's poetry that postmodern or innovative and experimental poetry in Australia continues to be a "dirty word" (Vickery "Beyond Strictly Verse and Pulp Diction" 126). Both Hemensley and Beveridge's comments reveal common complaints made against postmodernism generally. In his *Island* review Hemensley finds Lew's "postmodern lyricism" problematic, as is her postmodern style which is characterised in typical postmodern fashion as the predominance of "aggregates of effects, where saying isn't how one begins but where one hopes to finish up" (78). Similarly, in *Australian Book Review* Beveridge perceives Lew's poetry as 'superficial' (rather than deep) because "too much work has gone into polishing the topmost surfaces, so that the histories of the speakers and their grim tales remain buried and unexcavated". Beveridge's comments also reveal another common

complaint against postmodernism which involves the characterisation of postmodernism as all style or form and no content. Lew's poetry is "[t]oo prepossessing, too intent on pursing cadences that seem to have nothing to do with content other than to be pleasing in themselves":

> Lew's poetry certainly gives pleasure and delivers exquisite beauty (which you could argue is a moral position), and Lew has undoubtedly worked hard on making her language achieve the condition of music. However, the poetic imagination has to deliver more than just exceptional parts; psychic filaments that join lines and stanzas together, though invisible, need to have an organic, imperative feel. A poem must be more than just an assemblage of syntactical processes; there needs to be a coherent principle, even a sense of a sharing of meaning and contexts, a discernible lyrical or moral centre through which a work can be read, through which the world can (albeit, temporarily) be anchored.

Like the detractors of postmodernism, Beveridge finds Lew's poetry problematic because it is fragmented rather than unified, superficial rather than deep, all style and no content.

### Controversy: Quadrant and Patrick McCauley

The most scathing criticism of Lew's poetry demonstrates that the unfamiliar of emergent cultural formations can, as Raymond Williams states, stimulate 'disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble' (qtd. in Vickery, "Beyond Strictly Verse and Pulp Diction" 126). In September 2002 *Quadrant* published a four-page article by Patrick McCauley in which Lew and her poetry are vehemently denounced as representative of the insidious nature and the many problems inherent in the contemporary Australian poetry milieu. This article is part of a series of attacks by McCauley: another includes a *Quadrant* review of *Meanjin* (issue 2, 2001) tellingly entitled "Institutionally Sanctioned" and, another in *The Weekend Australian* argues against the political correctness of Australian poetry. A reply by Barry Hill in *The Weekend Australian* argues against McCauley's claims. In his article Patrick McCauley complains that the extensive attention and acclaim Lew has received is excessive and unwarranted. The critical scaffolding McCauley uses to admonish Lew's poetry is the age-old war between performance poetry

and poetry written for the page. Although the impetus for McCauley's article is a performance, "I heard Lew read some of her work when she featured at the Australian Fellowship of Writers' reading at the Water Rat Hotel in South Melbourne", he does not include Lew's poetry within the performance poetry genre because she is one of those "academic poets, who write for the page and publish their work in small literary magazines read by a few loyal readers" (63). McCauley draws readers' attention to what he perceives as the injustice which sees Lew and academic poets receiving all the funding while performance poets receive little. Of this situation he writes:

> the established poetry "literati" have been steadily ignoring this phenomena [that is, the rise in popularity of performance poetry, the lack of funding it receives, and the lack of publishing opportunities], no doubt hoping it will go away. They seem to fear it; they consistently belittle and mock performance poets, perhaps because much of the poetry written for the page has become quite inaccessible to the ear if not the eye. In my view this is the major reason for the lack of interest in poetry today. The average citizen cannot understand the abstract, surreal, postmodernist cleverness that many of the invisible and absent genius page poets choose to display. (63)

According to McCauley performance poetry is excluded from publication and poetry such as Lew's receives too much space because academic poets dominate poetry publication:

> The six or seven mainstream literary magazines that publish poetry are strongly aligned with a particular politic and usually, a university and a state (for example *Meanjin*: conservative, Melbourne University, Victoria). Much of the poetry in these magazines is directed at a very small, well educated (professional, influential), loyal readership. The poetry published in them is largely from graduates of their various universities, always written for the page, mostly in the English tradition, and quite often in language and form which is inaccessible to the ordinary citizen. (63)

Lew is McCauley's example par excellence of an academic poet who has undeservedly received funding and critical acclaim:

> One recently applauded poet, who has gained her reputation by being published by these small magazines, and who can be seen wearing the gown and cap of a PhD in letters on the web page www.thylazine.com.au, is Emma Lew. Her first book of poetry, *The Wild Reply* (Black Pepper Press, 1997) was awarded the Mary Gilmore Prize, the *Age* Book of the Year Award, and writer's grants of about $50,000 from the Australia Council. (63)

After this introduction McCauley launches an attack on the way Lew creates her poetry:

> Emma Lew's methodology involves writing down lines and phrases which take her eye from everywhere and anywhere (books of poems, novels, phone books, shops, advertising messages, Melways maps). She then arranges the lines, changes a word here and there, and bingo, a poem. (63)

McCauley's criticism of Lew's poetry is entirely focused on Lew's methodology. He is appalled by what he calls her "'cut-up' method" and implies that when he heard Lew read her poems her technique was obvious because they "came over as a list of 'one-liners' without a start, a middle or an end" (63). Resonating with Hemensley's criticism, McCauley dismisses Lew's poetry as "postmodernist indulgence" which is all "style" (63).

McCauley suggests that "those awarding literature grants" and awards share his fascination with her methodology (though not his disdain) claiming that it is Lew's "unorthodox method" that has won her awards and grants (63). Gig Ryan's comments for the *Age* award do not demonstrate any consideration of Lew's methodology:

> Lew's first book has an astonishing originality in its vivacious imperatives ("Start out and remain a villainess") and cool humour ("Will technology make me remote?"). This is often poetry of unadorned statements or questions and subtle non-sequiturs, which are always surprising, yet always confidently irreplaceable. She uses a variety of stanza forms, and sometimes rhymes and half-rhymes. In one of the best poems, *They Flew Me in on the Concorde from Paris*, the detachment of the narrator wavers between sardonic and naïve to dramatic effect. Lew's brisk, puzzling, intelligent narrators have not been heard before. (1997)

McCauley suggests that the judges suffer from a "cultural cringe" and choose Lew's poetry because it "show[s] off what they consider "the cleverest decorations" overseas, having no idea that "art" could be anything else, nor any regard for building an interested audience for poetry in this country" (63-64).

McCauley vehemently objects to Lew's poetic methodology, commenting that he "left the Water Rat Reading feeling conned" (64). For McCauley, Lew's poetry is dishonest

because of her methodology and it is therefore not "true to the art" of poetry, nor her readers/listeners (65). Lew's poetry is dishonest because it is not created from "first-hand information and first-hand experience":

> To be a poet takes courage, intelligence, commitment, persistence, and miracles. Miracles happen to those who make their own luck. A poet must be made up of body and soul, and have an exceptional understanding of, and heightened sense of empathy with, his [sic] fellow human being. Poets must hone their powers of observation (both internal and external) and must then have the courage to write about what they see regardless of race, politics or sex, regardless of what needs to be written to get a grant or publish a book, and regardless of what other poets or academics have observed differently.
>
> . . .
>
> a poet should do something, or see it in action, or be immersed in the subject of their poem, rather than read about it in books or on computers. A poet must experience, rather than simulate reality or rely on second-hand information. (65)

McCauley's criticism relies upon what Catherine Belsey defines as "empiricist-idealist" attitudes:

> common sense urges that 'man' is the origin and source of meaning, of action and of history (*humanism*). Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (*empiricism*), and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (*idealism*). (7)

Lew does not meet McCauley's expectations because her methodology is fraudulent; it lacks authenticity because she uses the words and experiences of others.


Not surprisingly, Emma Lew responded to McCauley's article in a letter to the editor. Her aim in doing so was to clarify her misrepresented methodology:

> While I don't believe that any writer should have to explain their creative process, I do wish to correct Patrick McCauley's misrepresentation of my work. He says: "Emma Lew's methodology involves writing down lines and phrases which take her eye from everywhere and anywhere … She then arranges the lines, changes a word here and there, and bingo, a poem."
>
> This implication that what I do amounts to throwing together random fragments, and then passing it off as poetry, is false. Yes, I often use lines and phrases from a range of sources, but only as a starting point. Everything I use I work and rework, usually taking weeks to create what, for me, is a coherent poem with the

sense and mood I'm seeking to convey. There's no "bingo" about it. The final draft would rarely contain even one line or phrase from the original material.

Alison Croggon, who is criticised in McCauley's article because she defended Emma Lew and is (according to McCauley) another academic poet, also responded to the article with a letter to the editor. Croggon points out that McCauley's understanding of Lew's methodology is "inaccurate":

> she does not use the "cut up" method in her work. Her process might be better compared to the sculptures of Rosalie Gascoigne, who used found objects to fashion, with deliberation and care, works of astounding beauty and emotional potency. (Poetry Live and on the Page, 5)

To vilify Lew's methodology for its lack of authenticity is, as Croggon suggests, an "unthinking acceptance of Romantic notions of artistic originality".

Like Hemensley's dismissal of Lew's poetry on the grounds that it is mere "postmodern lyricism", McCauley dismisses Lew's method as postmodern (64) and his criticism is steeped in anti-postmodern rhetoric which characterises the postmodern as superficial, style without substance, spiritually devoid, and a variety of other negative aspects. Michael Ward's letter to the editor in support of McCauley's article explicitly advocates the anti-postmodern position by entitling the letter "A Post Mortem on Postmodernism" and demonstrates some of the issues inherent within this framework: the "mosaic genre is empty . . . it deliberately defies the needs of local communities: masking critical social voices with the ethereal trappings of the bourgeois intelligentsia".

Although negative, the amount of attention Lew received in *Quadrant* is unusual for a new poet. However, as Susan McKernan explains in her article "The Question of Literary Independence: *Quadrant* and Australian Writing", it is less surprising given that *Quadrant* strives to dismiss new and innovative poetry. Unlike the usual role of a literary journal which involves "explaining the new and helping readers to approach literature

they find difficult to understand", *Quadrant* has "reversed" this role and assures readers "that any intelligent reader could understand good poetry without the need for explanation" (McKernan 171-172). It is not difficult to see why Lew's poems do not fit into the *Quadrant* mould:

> If a *Quadrant* poem can be categorised by a single word it is decorum. In general, the *Quadrant* poem uses a consistent, appropriate language; the ideas in the poem are presented and resolved in a disciplined and controlled manner. It is not simply that the poems are formal and devoid of modernist pretence; they have grace and elegance, they deal with poetic subjects, they are polite. Poetry of this kind is above politics and, some of the time, above life. (McKernan 173)

McKernan also notes that "experience was more important than imagination" for *Quadrant* (170). Unlike the poems favoured by *Quadrant,* Lew's are too wild to endorse the conservatism of the magazine.


As Lew's and Croggon's response to McCauley's criticism suggests, poets do not "have to explain their creative process", nor is a poet's methodology pivotal to understanding the poetry for as Croggon suggests "it's the work that counts". However, considering the unusual way Lew works it is certainly of critical interest and it is not surprising that it has gained attention. And yet, the issue is more complicated than the simple claim that Lew *should* or should not explain her methodology because as a relatively new poet the issue is whether Lew *can* explain her methodology. My discussions with Lew revealed that she was willing to explain how she worked but besides the few comments about borrowing or 'pilfering' from various texts it was difficult if not impossible for her to explain the important process of how these borrowings created poems (Email to Author. "Re: feeding on language" 12 May 2004). Lew admitted that our discussions about her poetry were "difficult" because they involved "too much reflection" and she is "scarily anti-reflection, [and] un-curious!" (Email to Author. 13 May 2004). Not all poets are able to articulate their poetic practices, and unlike those who have become renowned for their

essays on poetics, for example the American Language poets and T.S. Eliot, many poets never write about their poetics. Lew may never explain her methodology fully, but from the few comments that she has made and from the poetry created, McCauley's uninformed and bias explanation over-simplifies the process.

Croggon's comparison of the way Lew works with the way Rosalie Gascoigne creates her sculptures from found objects is a far more accurate and appropriate correlation than McCauley's explanation of Lew's so-called 'cut-up' methodology which produces a poem by arranging words from other sources much like checking off numbers on a bingo card. The previously quoted comments by Gig Ryan make a similar connection between Lew's poetry and sculpture by describing a poem as a "monument of words like a pyramid, [and] a beautifully constructed object" (*HEAT* 233-234). Given this correlation, one might expect to gain insight into Lew's methodology via that of a sculptor of found objects like Gascoigne. However, even an experienced artist like Gascoigne was unable to fully articulate that part of the creative process that Lew's comments struggle to explain. In interview with Stephen Feneley, Gascoigne comments that she collects objects or "raw material" that she "like[s] the look of", and then she "start[s] putting things together": "If anything grabs my eye, gives me a blow in the solar plexus, that's for me. I don't query it, question where it came from or what it is, you see. I just like". Certainly Lew and Gascoigne's sources are different but they share an irreverence or bower-bird type of attitude that considers everywhere and anywhere a possibility for pilfering: Lew finds interesting lines and words in books, on television, overheard conversations, all and any form of language use is open to her pilfering; Gascoigne spent much time scavenging from country dumps, the side of the road, paddocks, everywhere and anywhere that there were objects to be found was suitable. Just as Gascoigne is quite vague about the collection process – why some objects are collected and not others

– Lew cannot fully explain why she 'pilfers' some lines rather than others. However, both sculptor and poet share a passion for collecting and both collect more than they will ever use. Like Lew's many exercise books full of collected lines and words, Gascoigne always had more objects than she could use in her art. An important similarity is the disparity between what is collected and the unrelated work of art created. Just as Feneley states that the "finished work of art doesn't speak about the object that it's made from", Lew's reworking of the pilfered lines results in a poem that has either little or no resemblance or relation to the original material.

Once the objects/lines are collected the creative process is even more difficult to explain. Gascoigne comments: "you do a lot of hand movements, a lot of bending and stretching and stooping to get the one finished article. And the place is littered with things that haven't come off. But I know I can when it's right for me, let's put it that way". As previously mentioned, Lew describes her process as an "accretion" which involves "piling on and scraping back, piling more on and scraping back again" (Email to Author. "Re: poetic form" 24 April 2004). Gascoigne also mentions a similar process in which she works to "pare things down".

An important correlation between these two 'pilfering' artists is the pivotal role of emotion and feeling. Rather than create "pictures", Gascoigne is interested in creating feeling. Quoting Bruce Pollard on her sculptures, Gascoigne agrees that her work 'is about feeling, it's not about seeing, it's about the way it feels'. For Gascoigne, emotion is an important part of the creative process as she states:

> you start putting things together, and that looks electric or something. And then usually you recall, as I've often said, emotion, recollected in tranquillity, something you felt once that really turned you on and made you, moved you from where you were to somewhere else and so this dawns on you as you start

working and usually in the end, the work encapsulates something you have deeply felt.

Similarly, Lew is less interested in narrating stories than creating feeling. She does not mention emotion recalled, but for her feeling is all important: "I think a poem should make us FEEL, it should leave us both satisfied and gaping" (Email to Author. "Re: Self/Other" 4 March 2000). For Lew the "point of a poem is to confuse and resolve at the same time" and she hopes that readers of her poetry will gain "a sense of rage and acquiescence, horror and farce – all at once!" (Email to Author. 13 May 2004). Although the creative processes of these pilfering artists have only been partly explained, the knowledge that these creative processes are driven by the desire to create art of powerful feelings is significant.

One of the ways Lew achieves poems of powerful feelings is by focusing on the emotions of the characters or subjects. Like dramatic poetry, Lew's poems are composed of a person speaking their thoughts or feelings (usually alone or to oneself), there is an emphasis on the personal and subjective, and there is always a dramatic situation and frequently an ironic element (Preminger et al. 799). Unlike the lyric mode which predominantly characterises new nineties poetry, Lew's speaking 'I' is not the "lyric voice of the poet" but "the dramatic voice of an imagined character" (Preminger et al. 800). Despite the predominance of these dramatic characters, the majority of Lew's poems are narrated in the first person pronoun: the narrating 'I' of "The Recidivist" is a criminal awaiting a coffin (56); the "strange face" of the 'I' of "Cartouche" is a "scavenger", shivering with "jackals" in Africa (54); the 'I' of "The Wild Reply" lacks "nothing" but mysteriously needs "proofs, not flame" (53); the 'I' of "The Understudy" "want[s] to multiply / the quick comings of despair" (52); the 'I' of "Coal" has "nothing but slow trains, / the daily thud of vodka, / eerie light from a skull", and asks forgiveness

because she/he is "in a trance" (51); the 'I' in "Thebes" "think[s] of you" and strangely asks you to "radiate" (50); the 'I' of "Bungalows" is a drug addict journeying with her "demons" in "de facto asylums" (49); in "Earlier Cartographers of the Moon" the sardonic narrator speaks of "you" who "can no more trick / the universe into granting favours / than your parents into loving you" and "we [who] are not free to tell our dreams" (48). Lew's oeuvre features multiple types of subjectivity. Like characters in a play adopting different masks for different characters, each poem brings with it a new subject and a new world, and readers are swiftly carried from scene to scene/ poem to poem with only the emotions of the characters to guide them. Although there are many details missing, Lew's poems are intimate and personal because the speaking 'I' expresses private thoughts and feelings. For example, the characters often reveal their desires: in "Marshes" the subject informs, "I want to walk again in this miry place. / I want the fever and fret beneath, though / it's something I forget, like pain" (13); the female speaker in "Loquax Ludi" mocks herself and her friends, "our highest hopes – to live / as softly hummed, to hammer / wisdom through the walls, to be / lulled by walk and endless sun" (46); "What I want is to get this pain off my body" ("Flourish" 80); understanding is sought in "Of Quite Another Order", "I would have given anything / To be able to make my pupil understand my act" (1). Subjects are not always interested in honourable desires, as the "bitter" revenging female character of "Cornfield School" reveals, "I have seen a man hanged, / now I wish to see one burned", "Squinch the spirit out, / blow him down for his tongue" (62), and the character in "Prey" daydreams of "wiping out the whole school" (82). Whether honourable or not, Lew's poetry presents a mix of passionate characters driven by their desires and needs, and it is the characters' feelings that guide the reading process.

Unlike the use of an illusional mask which hides a character's secrets, subjectivity in Lew's poetry is severely exposed. In a starkly honest fashion, the characters reveal their vulnerabilities, fears and anguishes: a female speaker admits that she "could not grasp" the games he played with her ("Her Embroideries" 21); a subject admits "I don't know the language of this country" and "My puritan / soul half in a sea, clawing deep in the peace / of mud" ("Marshes" 13); "I needed to be saved from myself", "I played a game / called 'Wreck Everything', though I dressed / in silks and delicately nurtured thanks. / But I'm frightened of another sort of ruin" ("Usual Rosettes" 35-36); "I am too young / and you too imperilled, which causes / tears – hot, heavy tears", "How I envied your sisters their place / on the sofa" ("Beloved Jug of Cream" 38); "I was afraid of you" ("Thirty Versts" 49); "I confessed my sins and they are under / the blood, and I sinned back then /when I was caught behind my shadow" ("Praise Report" 61); "And I struggle: where are my pieces?" ("Plantain" 67); "I am in love, / filled with the horror and sorrow / of what I am leaking, little hunchback / girl they got from bones" ("Another King Tide" 81); "I break things because I am afraid" ("Anything the Landlord Touches" 90); "Few loons and I would live / in a corner at the airport, / not for the sequence / but the agony we had to be in", "I don't know where I am, I never know what's going to happen" ("Holes and Stars" 5); "I'm talking about panic in my own private driveway" ("Mythic Bird of Panic" 6); "This gesture of putting my hand to my eye / alerts the world that I'm still alive" ("Goodbye to Maybe" 14); "I'm being blackmailed again" ("I'm Being Blackmailed Again" 17). Characters divulge personal information about the struggles of life: "I strive and struggle" ("The Tale of Dark Louise" 17); "I am now suffering", "I am alone" ("Bounty" 28); "In searching for faith, / I soiled my hands" ("Famous Vexations" 32); "The mud seemed a merciful provision, the village did its best to teach us fear" ("Red" 52); "I'm crying my own / real tears, and that sunny faith / I've been searching I've been seeking" ("Praise Report" 61); "She said

that truth excited her" ("Fugue of the Deal" 75); "He is troubled by her long caress" ("Swamp Giving" 78). Similarly, narrators disclose the secrets of other characters. Of the subject's teacher in "Rose Constructions" we are privy to personal information about the teacher burning letters "silently, reverently" (22) and the narrating subject confides that she treasures their relationship and her teacher's every word, "All the things / we talk about / I sew into the seams" (23). A nervous woman in "Particulars" "expressed the desire / to be 'herself' again" and is "haunted by futility" (40). Who the speaking subject is remains a mystery but she has "servants" who are sent away while the woman tells of her dream. The disturbed man in "Blemishes" "cannot go backwards / to another time when / he was touched by her" (42); the "uneasy" and "lost" woman in "Jasmine" fears "that the dead / will jump up to settle accounts" (43); in "Passage" "He has no house, only a key / The terrible carved-deep grief" (56); in "Aurora Exit" "She sins calmly", is afraid of nothing, and "her face is made for suffering" (59); "He was already the least curable, most diminished of people" ("Of Quite Another Order" 1). Lew's poems focus on the many different emotions and feelings of the characters. Rather than donning the many different masks of subjectivity to hide a character's feelings, Lew uses the device to reveal emotion.

Considering Lew's poetics is driven by the desire to make readers feel, it is interesting that in her letter to the editor Croggon points out that when McCauley initially discussed Lew's poetry with her he was "deeply moved" by the experience of hearing Lew read at the Water Rat Hotel. Croggon states that McCauley did not mention any of the objections raised in his *Quadrant* article; he did not comment that the poetry was "too clever and 'inaccessible', but that it deeply moved him". Given Lew's desire to create poetry that makes readers feel, it can be assumed that in this case her poetry was successful. Indeed, poetry that is usually 'powerfully moving' is frequently praised for

such qualities. However, perhaps the problem for McCauley was not that he was moved by Lew's poetry but that he was moved by poetry that he discovered was 'unauthentic' and thus he felt 'conned'. As many of the reviews of Lew's poetry demonstrate, McCauley's "deeply" moving experience is not an isolated response. Julie Hunt in her *Overland* review suggests that because the experience of Lew's poetry is paramount "[i]t is easier to describe the work in terms of what it does rather than what it is" (94). The experiential impact of Lew's poetry is discussed in various ways: it seduces (Beveridge, "Seductive Amnesia"); it can "jag and haunt, arrest and cajole" (Wallace-Crabbe, "A Haunting, Modern Voice for the Old World"); "it smoulders and blazes; it stares straight at you, ready to seduce, ready (even better – or worse) to spook" (Wearne, "Murray and Other Rivers" 43), it can "disorientate the reader" (Hunt, "True Fever" 94); "lines startle" and landscapes are "too emotionally intense to be called symbolic" (Pierce, "Search for a Sense of Place"). MTC Cronin discusses the experience of reading the poems when she comments that these "are a species of poems into which you can 'fall' and enjoy the words, phrases and atmospheres they create", poems "wash and move and sparkle", adding that they are "touchingly naked in emotion" ("Rev. of *The Wild Reply*").

Although the experience and the emotional impact of poetry are vital to reading processes it is frequently omitted from critical discussion because like issues of embodiment it is outside of the realm of rational and objective knowledge. Despite being a 'tabooed' topic, or perhaps in spite of this fact, πo, one of Australia's most significant (and irreverent and radical) poets, emphasises the importance of the experience of poetry as follows:

> BE: How can you tell if a piece of writing is a poem?
>
> πo: It gives you a hit! It does something to you that you know is different from anything else – prose, drama, etc. (Pi O interviewed by Brad Evans 44)

Asked about his favourite poets, πo replies:

> I love lots and lots of poets, being influenced is my forte!  A good poem can make me live off it for months, or even years!  I get different things from different poets and they have values I get into or not, if not 'values' then 'vibrations' I can get into.
>
> BE: How do you react when you have read a poem written by somebody which you feel is great?
>
> πo: I feel so nourished by it sometimes that I feel I don't have to eat!  I love drowning in it. (44)

Although a forbidden fruit in respectable poetry criticism, as πo suggests, the experience of poetry is indeed palpable.

One way of understanding the experience of poetry is via the emotions poetry evokes. In "Emotions in Poetry: Where Are They and How Do We Find Them?" Gunnar Hansson attends to the way literary critics mention their experience and the emotional impact of poetry:

> After having described the thoughts and ideas he has found in it, he goes on to say that the many feelings and emotions that are attached to these thoughts and ideas come rushing in from all directions, making the emotional content of the poem so inexhaustibly rich, the suggestion so strong, and the emotional tension so intense. (275)

More often than not however, this aspect of poetry is not explored and, as Hansson suggests, when literary critics "talk about emotions in poetry, or about poetry as the language of emotions, it is very likely that they do not talk about emotions" (275). Rather it is more common

> that the emotions the critic is talking about belong to the *cognitive* domain, in the meaning of the poem as he has first constructed them, and then analysed and described them.  As such, they would not be much different from some other kinds of meanings, as, for instance, the meanings of symbols and metaphors. Like symbols and metaphors, emotions even have referents, although these referents can seldom be clearly identified and rarely named in conventional language. (275-276)

However, emotions are important to poetry and at times poetry can evoke all types of emotions. McCauley's reaction of indignation at being so deeply moved by poetry written with what he perceives as an inauthentic method, led him to implicitly deny (either consciously or unconsciously) that he was emotionally moved at all. Perhaps the passion that fuelled McCauley's objection was transferred from his experience of Lew's poetry at the Water Rat Hotel reading. As Hansson discusses, the emotional impact of poetry can be extremely forceful:

> One example is a woman who, when reading a condensed and suggestive poem, collapsed and had to be taken care of by a psychiatrist. After a couple of weeks, her reaction was still very disturbed and prohibitive. Another example was a man who was highly upset by his reading of a poem. He did not need a psychiatrist, however – instead, he used very rude words, accusing the person who administered the reading session, making him responsible for the upsetting experience. (278)

Empirically grounded poetry criticism like the above certainly emphasises the experience of poetry and the emotional impact it can have. Although different in orientation, McCauley's response is similarly extreme for it is rare that a relatively new poet like Emma Lew is annihilated in a four-page article in *Quadrant* (or any other literary journal).

Because the quality of emotion and feeling of Lew's poetry is pivotal to the poetics, her poetry challenges the critical convention which denies the importance and inclusion of a discussion of these issues. To ignore the powerful feelings of Lew's poetry is to ignore the poetics that drives it, thus poetry criticism needs to find appropriate ways of approaching Lew's emotional quality. Furthermore, when reading Lew's poetry emotions and feelings are pivotal to the meaning-making processes. In the absence of narrative development or an authorial 'I' to dictate the meaning of the poem, we "sense meaning" as Plunkett suggests in her review of *The Wild Reply* (205).

Dennis Haskell in his chapter in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, "Poetry Since 1965", approaches the issues of emotion and feeling in poetry, and the consequences for criticism, by quoting distinguished Australian poet Robert Gray: 'the quality of the emotion' should be seen as a natural aesthetic category – in fact, it should be seen as the one by which we ultimately judge a work of art' (qtd. in Haskell, 279). Haskell claims that Gray's suggestion is the "most radically different way of viewing poetry" because "it is a concept that resists investigation" and, quoting from Kenneth Slessor's poem "The Atlas", declares that as far as poetry criticism is concerned "human emotion is still a 'Cuckooz Contrey' of uncharted, probably unchartable territory" and the "link between language and emotion is ultimately mysterious; one cannot track Gray's idea without falling into the abyss of subjectivity" (279). However, Haskell is not completely dismissive of Gray's critical framework; his decision to include it in a chapter in an authorative text suggests that it does not entirely belong to the 'Cuckooz Contrey'. Furthermore, Haskell points out that "Gray's position is close to that form which non-literary people think about poetry, thereby avoiding elitism" and for this reason it is worthy of consideration. Haskell also comments that he finds it "odd that no one has picked up Gray's comment since he made it in 1979, and promulgated or debated it", suggesting perhaps that as difficult as it is, it is worthy of serious consideration.

Gray's suggestion that poetry should be judged according to "the quality of the emotion" can be understood as involving two forms of emotion: (i) the quality of the emotion of the poem and (ii) the quality of the emotion evoked (by the emotion of the poem). To focus on the "*quality* of the emotion" is, as Gray's statement explicitly claims, an evaluative framework which seeks to ascertain whether the emotion of a poem is 'good' (worthy of praise because it is profound, strong, intense, true, superior), or 'bad' (not worthy of praise because it is weak, insipid, dull, et cetera). These two aspects of the

quality of emotion are not unrelated: if a poem's quality of emotion is strong/profound/good then it will evoke powerful emotional responses and if a poem's quality of emotion is weak/pathetic/bad then it will not evoke an emotional response and it will probably not stimulate interest. In relation to McCauley's deeply felt experience of Lew's poetry, the quality of the emotion equates with that which is 'good' because it is strong and intense.

While the "the link between language and emotion is ultimately mysterious", it is a link that Lew's poetry prioritises and therefore it is vital to poetry criticism engaged with her oeuvre. Although controversial, the quality of emotion of poetry does not have to be "a concept that resists investigation", nor do critics investigating this issue have to fall into the "abyss of subjectivity". If ways of approaching the quality of emotion in poetry are not admitted into critical discussions it is likely that more emotionally troubled responses like McCauley's will occur because the emotional response is repressed. The 'return of the repressed' always manages to find some form of articulation.

One approach to the quality of emotion in Lew's poetry has been demonstrated by the reviewers' comments which focus on the emotional impact or experience of this deeply moving poetry. Another approach involves attending to the lyrical qualities of Lew's poetry and it is this approach which focuses on the emotional quality of the poem rather than the reader's response. Considering the dramatic elements of Lew's poetry it may seem odd to discuss her poems as lyrics. In his review of *Anything the Landlord Touches* Chris Wallace-Crabbe draws attention to this point by explicitly stating that "all the language in this book *affects* the reader in the mode of lyric poetry, not as narrative, which calls for One damn Thing After Another, as John Masefield noted" (emphasis added). Alert to the narrative disguise of Lew's poetry, Wallace-Crabbe points out that this is not

poetry that can be read according to a narrative logic of cause and effect and emphasises that Lew's poetry demands to be read as lyric poetry.

Lyric poetry is non-narrative and non-dramatic, but many other characteristics have been and continue to be included when the term lyric is used in critical analysis:

> L[yric]. is one of the three general categories of poetic lit., the others being narrative (or epic) and dramatic (qq.v.). Although the differentiating features between these arbitrary categories are sometimes moot, l[yric]. poetry may be said to retain most prominently the elements which evidence its origins in musical expression – singing, chanting, and recitations to musical accompaniment . . . The primary importance of the musical element is indicated in the many generic terms which various cultures have used to designate nonnarrative and nondramatic poetry: the Eng. "l[yric].," derived from the Gr. *lyra,* a musical instrument; the Cl. Gr. *melic,* or *mele* (air melody); the Ch. *shi* or *ci* (word song) . . . Among the best known and most often cited proscriptions regarding the l[yric]. are that it must (1) be brief (Poe); (2) "be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other, all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influence of metrical arrangement" (Coleridge); (3) be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth); (4) be an intensely subjective and personal expression (Hegel); (5) be an "inverted action of mind upon will" (Schopenhauer); or (6) be "the utterance that is overheard" (Mill). (Preminger et al. 713-714)

Lew's poems are lyrics which disguise themselves as dramatic narratives. Typical of dramatic narratives the poems in *Anything the Landlord Touches* are full of adventurous characters: there is "The Rider" who "Without word or whip or spur" dashes "Downwards to a dark stampede" (19); the mysterious teacher of "Rose Constructions" who "opens the window / and lets in the dark flowers" (23); a woman in "The Clover Seed Hex" runs "deep in the village playing on a drum" (25); a sailor of some sort in "Bounty" cries to his love, "O my darling, the rigging swarms. Help me out of this blind life. The shouts of gulls, the groping reefs. Our ship, with its iron heart." (28); a man who "delights in the tiny feet of his wives", "prepares the document and sends a messenger with a list" (29); a woman in an army or "troupe" who gives "birth in the street" (30), and numerous others. These characters and their adventures dress the poems in a dramatic and narrative guise, but unlike narrative forms there are few plots to

follow. Narrative poetry presents "a sequence of events or facts . . . whose disposition in time implies causal connection and point" (Preminger et al. 814), but Lew's poetry does not follow this formula nor are readers informed about who the characters are or why they are doing what they're doing. There are few guidelines to assist an understanding of the adventures Lew's characters perform: we do not know where the rider is going or why (19); nor why the teacher sleeps in the haunted chapel, burning letters (23); nor why the woman "turned the water jug over on its mouth" (25); there is no information about why the sailor of "Bounty" is "alone" in a ship at sea (28); little insight or connections are made between the man who loves tiny feet and the woman who "looks around anxiously" (29); we do not know where or what army the "troupe" of "Snow and Gold" is fighting in (30). As Conte informs, this type of aesthetic practice is part of the "postmodern innovation" of serial composition which is "determined by the discontinuous and often aleatory manner in which one thing follows another" (*Unending Design* 3). Unlike the "leisurely pace and unitary quality of the nineteenth-century" which determined the unified and organic poetic processes of romantic and modernist poetry, postmodern poetry "accommodates the rapidly shifting contexts and the over-whelming diversity of messages that we now experience as part of our daily routine" (3).

Wallace-Crabbe's use of the term 'lyric' takes into consideration the musical quality of the poetry and the affects of this on the reader. It also involves a consideration of the "powerful feelings" inherent to the content/subject of the poetry and the effects of this on the reader. His brief review attends to the experience of what he describes as "disconcerting poems", which "jag and haunt, arrest and cajole". On the matter of form, Wallace-Crabbe suggests Lew creates these powerful experiences through various poetic techniques: "seductiveness resides in a repetition of lines: this suits her, with her fondness for peremptory truncations, her ear for the sinister effects of end-stopping",

"her footing is usually excellent", "everything is end-stopped, the verse hungering to be proverbs, and ravishing us with romantic excess at the same time".

Many other reviewers discuss the lyricality of Lew's poetry. Nicholas Birns in his *Antipodes* review writes that *The Wild Reply* "features medium-length lyrics often presenting a first-person persona with a wry sense of the unexpected, the incongruous, and the tragic" . Angelika Fremd's *Imago* review comments on the "lyrical" qualities of Lew's poetry (152) and Martin Duwell's review in *The Weekend Australian* draws attention to the "night-saturated expressionist lyrics" . Alan Wearne's *Eureka Street* review refers to Lew's "sombre lyrics" (43) and Bev Roberts in *Australian Book Review* comments on Lew's "meditative lyricism" (50). Hand-in-hand with this lyric description is the discussion of music, as Paul Hetherington writes in *The Canberra Times* "Lew has a good ear for the music of phrases" (10). Gig Ryan compares the rhythm of some of Lew's poems with a "nursery-rhyme chant" and emphasises that such a "poem works chiefly through sound" ("The New Mannerism" 237). Judith Beveridge in *Australian Book Review* commences her review with: "Emma Lew's poetic covenant is with a poetics that has as its chief enterprise the music of diction, syntax and structure" and of the effect of this music she writes that she was "captivated by its beauty and music – not just captivated, but actively seduced – and this is a book, I believe, whose prime intention is seduction" .

Like the reviews of Minter's poetry, the musicality of Lew's poetry is noted for its seductive qualities. However, Lew's poetry sings to a different beat. Whereas Minter's poetry luxuriates in gentle, harmonious tones, and is composed of sensually liquid sounds like the "honey-eater's wings / hovering over phosphorescent flowers" (*Empty Texas* 42), Lew's poetry emits a regular rhythm of strong beats. Rather than the seductive fluidity created by enjambment, Lew's poetry hypnotically seduces with a consistently regular

beat and the force of the abrupt end-stopped lines.  Composed in quatrains and in a variation of a duple metre – or even more strongly, a regular stress metre – Lew's lyricality commands listening:

### The True Dark Town

The snows were melting but I wanted to speak.
Swollen and undressed, filling the roads.
The mountain, so beautiful.  We were afraid.
    Death buttoned my coat.

I smelled their odour when they came
down the incoherent paths of the mountain.
the petals of the flower were hushed.
    It's the blood from that night.

A child has sheltered her books with her body.
 A man was seen hoarding.  Who can be sure?
This is the only thing I have rescued.
    It's pitiful.

When the rain came, when they opened fire.
Such trifles as the noise of stars.
I had no idea the dead were so heavy.
    It's autumn now.

The past will be a bitter land.
I do not trust the face of my father
The wind, they say, is going to blow till the end.
    The fleas are hungry. (*Anything the Landlord Touches* 51)

The first three lines of each stanza are nearly always four stressed beats and four unstressed beats.  Lew does not formalise this (loose) stress metre, expanding at times when appropriate into five-beat lines (as in the second last line of the poem).  Similarly, the indented, shorter final line of each stanza has two or three beats – with stanza two concluding with "pitiful" - not quite two but closer to one with a whispering second beat.  Like many of Lew's poems, this forceful, strong rhythm creates a serious tone, a tone of importance which demands attention.

"The True Dark Town" is typical of Lew's 'serious' poems: the strong and forceful rhythm sounds the beat of importance which is appropriate for the serious subject matter. This is a poem about life and death, war and murder, and the desperate struggle for survival. The poem does not divulge specific details – we do not know where, when or who is involved – and thus much remains unknown about the subject matter. The "histories of the speakers and their grim tales remain buried and unexcavated", as Beveridge suggests ("Seductive Amnesia"), but this does not hinder the serious and important tone of the events. Rather than a specific war or event, Lew's poems could be about any war and all wars. It is not, as Beveridge suggests, a case of Lew "pursuing cadences that seem to have nothing to do with content other than to be pleasing in themselves". On the contrary, the serious tone of "The True Dark Town" is perfectly appropriate for the serious subject matter. Despite, or perhaps because of this lack of knowledge about the narrative and the characters we "sense meaning" (Plunkett 205) by registering the feeling of the poem. I am reminded of Perloff's comments about John Ashbery's poems, in which she states that the open meaning of a poem does not "imply that the poem can mean anything one likes" because the "tonality of feeling" directs the reading experience (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 260-261). While the narrative details of the poems are left to readers' creative minds to fill in the gaps, the feeling of the poem is fully established and directs the way readers make sense of the poem.

To accept the challenge Lew's deeply moving poetry provides criticism needs to attend to the "quality of emotion", as Gray defines it, or the "tonality of feeling", as Perloff defines it. In relation to one of Lew's powerfully moving poems, "The True Dark Town", this involves discussing the way the form and content work together: the way the lyrical sound and rhythm of the poem work with discontinuous narrative fragments to create a poem in which the quality of emotion is overwhelming and the tonality of feeling

is various and profound.  The poem commences with a sense of urgency because the speaker has something important to say before the snow finishes melting or despite the melting snow.  Formally this sense of urgency is reflected by the strong rhythm of the regular stress metre.  The next three sentences of stanza one are not grammatically correct because they are incomplete, and the short, abrupt manner of these sentences builds on the tone of urgency begun in line one.  It is as if the speaker is in such a hurry he/she does not have time to complete the sentences.  Is it the snow that is "Swollen and undressed, [and] filling the roads"?  Although unusual, it is not completely absurd to describe melting snow as "Swollen".  On the other hand, "undressed" is an unusual way to describe snow of any type, and hence it seems that "undressed" refers to the speaker.  Perhaps the speaker is swollen with pregnancy, and the image of a swollen and undressed pregnant woman in the snow builds a tone of vulnerability and desperation.  The sense of urgency slackens with the first sentence of line three; it is as if the speaker has stopped to take in her surroundings.  This is created formally with the longer words "mountain, so beautiful" (with long sounding consonants m and f, and long sounding vowels, ou, o, eau, and u) and by the pause created by the comma.  With the second sentence of line three other people enter the poem and the sense of urgency returns with the added feeling of fear.  With the personification of  "Death" commencing the shorter fourth line, we are informed that these peoples' lives are in danger.  The importance of this line is indicated by the change in rhythm, with stresses on three of the four words in the line.  By the end of stanza one it seems that it is the weather that threatens death but there is a sense that it is only part of the threat.  Working in conjunction with this discontinuous narrative are the emotional qualities of anxiety and nervousness.  A feeling of suspense is evoked at the conclusion of stanza one: what does the subject fear?

The pace picks up again (four stress beats) with the first line of stanza two. There is a change in time as the narrator remembers and the narrative confirms the feeling of stanza one: there is more to fear than the weather. The regular beat continues, as if the intruders are marching down the mountain at that very moment. Are those who threaten people, animal, or monster? Who or what smells? The mountain paths might be "incoherent" because the travellers are lost or perhaps the paths are difficult to follow because of their jumbled nature. A heightened sense of foreboding is created as the arrival of the intruders is anticipated, but like the "incoherent paths of the mountain" this is a discontinuous narrative without such details. In line three of stanza two, the pace is slowed with the change from four stresses to three. Formally echoing the content, the line is quiet due to the personified flowers which are presented onomatopoetically as "hushed": the soft consonants of l and f, and here p and t have a soft sound, and the alliteration of l and s. Deathly silent and still, the final fourth line of stanza two breaks this atmosphere with the despairing line, "It's the blood from that night." The monosyllabic stressed words, "blood" and "night", resonate with "Death" from the fourth line of stanza one. The juxtaposition of line three/quiet and four/loud enhances the dramatic conclusion of this stanza. Similarly, the importance of the fourth line of stanza two is emphasised by the change in time: the move from the past to the present. There is nothing in the narrative to inform that the speaker has returned to the present; it is signposted grammatically with "It's". The build up of the first three lines climaxes in the final line of the stanza through both narrative and form. Due to the tone of violence of the final fourth line of stanza two a shocking effect is created and the feeling of the poem changes from desperation to horror.

The third stanza adds more detail to the narrative but as far as narrative information is concerned it is more confusing than enlightening. Who is the child? Who is the man?

How do they relate to the narrative? Are they dead? A sense of relief is offered via the question, "Who can be sure?", partly because it suggests that uncertainty is expected, and formally because a question provides a change. The metre reverts back to four beats but this time there are more off-beats which slow the pace. There is an almost automatic tone to the first line and the first sentence of line two of stanza three. This arises because of the rhythm and because these statements are like a list. There is a sense that the speaker *must* list the facts of the event: "A child has sheltered her books with her body. / A man was seen hoarding". Yet while the retelling of this information is necessary, it is also excruciatingly painful. To deal with this pain the speaker procures an objective stance and removes herself from the emotions of the retold trauma. In combination with these statements the rhetorical question presents a hopeless feeling. The third line of stanza three alludes to something that the narrator has "rescued", but just what has been rescued is unknown. In conjunction with the question, which is directed at nobody but sensed as directed at the reader, this line creates a sense of intimacy between the narrator and the reader. It is as if the narrator is holding "This … thing" up in front of readers and showing us what has been rescued. The final line of stanza three, like the other final lines of stanzas one and two, is shorter and (whether read as three or two stressed beats) the sharp sounding alliteration of i, t, and p, venomously spits out the words. This stanza creates a feeling of desperation and bitterness.

With the fourth stanza the poem seems to enter the mind of a person in shock or one who is so seriously disturbed by events that speech has faltered. The first line is not a complete sentence. The catastrophe of the event is grammatically presented by shattering normative sentence structure. This line is one of the most informative in the poem and yet paradoxically it is grammatically erroneous. The sense of the line is clear: a

group of people opened fire and murdered another group of people. The next line, "Such trifles as the noise of stars", might have Gloria Yates suggesting that the poem has turned from the "sublime" to the "ridiculous" and into the world of absurdity and insanity. Well, yes and no: the line presents an insane world but the poem is not ridiculous for presenting it this way. How does language present such horror and these feelings of terror? If it were possible to hear the noise of stars it would not be a thing of small value for the noise of stars is not a trifle, nor is the fact of one group of people opening fire on another, but it is certainly as senseless. The next line returns to the grim reality of the event and the fact that dead people are heavy, but they have to be carried or moved. The stanza concludes heavily with autumn, a season when dead leaves fall from trees, when people close up their homes and hide against the wind and the coming winter, when spring and new life seem too far away to contemplate.

The final stanza is indeed desolate. The first line is shorter than all the other first lines; rhythmically sprung to emphasise "bitter land". This line hisses with the alliterative sound of "past" and "bitter". Although not a very original metaphor – land used to present time past – it is balanced by the unfamiliar and shocking statement of the next line: not being able to trust the face of one's father suggests that no person can be trusted. The sound of this line contrasts with the previous due to the (paradoxically) softer sounds created by rounded vowels, "do not trust", and the alliteration of the gentle consonant f in "face" and "father". Something that should be comforting, the face of your father, is here another source of fear. Formally the contrast emphasises time: while the first line explicitly looks to the past, the second is in the present and the future. The only constant and reliable element is the wind which "is going to blow till the end" and this is not something promising. Again this is not a very original line but again it is followed by a line that surprises with its contrasting sharp and short beat and

peculiar statement of "The fleas are hungry." A desperate atmosphere concludes the poem because there is not enough food to live on, so little food that even a creature as tiny as a flea does not have enough food. A feeling of vulnerability is powerfully evoked with the image of the fleas which will be better fed than the starving people because they can eat the people. The poem concludes and the location of "The True Dark Town" remains mysterious, as does the speaking persona's identity.

Despite the lack of details a sense of the subject's character is evoked because of the intimate knowledge shared by the speaking subject (first-person pronoun 'I'). In the first line the subject acknowledges a desire: "I wanted to speak". From these few words the character's determination and strength of character are glimpsed. Another important insight into the character is the moment taken, within this traumatic experience, to notice beauty, "The mountain, so beautiful". Even with death threatening the subject is deeply attuned to the beauty of the surroundings and this suggests an element of hope. Further evidence of the subject's synthesis with the environment is the ability to smell the enemy. Like an animal alert to danger this character has every sensing power geared towards survival. While what the subject has rescued is "pitiful", the fact that the subject has rescued anything at all is evidence of a wilful character. These aspects of character do not reveal a nihilistic approach to life; this subject demonstrates strength of character and is able to perceive the beauty of life even when death threatens. The will to survive is strong and the subject demonstrates hopeful determination in a future free of this trauma.

"The True Dark Town" is not a narrative of cause and effect nor is it composed of one sequence following another. However, the quality of emotions are indeed appropriate to an event like the one in this poem. The details of the events are absent but the form and

content of this poem combine powerfully. The 'quality of emotion' or feeling of the poem is appropriately strong and overwhelming. Whether it be war or some other disaster, Lew makes language work to convey the feelings conducive to the atrocities of the events: intense, mixed feelings of foreboding, fear, anxiety, horror, violence, desperation, shock, disgust, hopelessness and loss. Unlike conventional narratives which present a story constructed by events and characters, Lew's poems are psychological narratives or narratives of feelings. They do not plot cause and effect but the emotional and psychological states of the characters. It is, as Elizabeth Bishop states in her review of *The Wild Reply*, because Lew's poems "render the material world opaque, projecting the psychic states of a speaking 'I'" (148) that readers do not know the details of the situation but feel the emotional state of the subject.

The experience and emotional impact of many of Lew's poems cannot be easily explained in relation to character or subject matter. In her *Australian Women's Book Review* Michelle Mee comments on this aspect, stating that "there is the suggestion, the feeling, of intended or forthcoming violence" but this is "not [created] in the subject matter" but by the "language that vaults and spires and arches in the architecture of the mind" (35). "Coal" also demonstrates the emotional power of a poem that does not rely on narrative detail.

> The angel crushed my shoulder
> in the beautiful annexe.
> I only begin to breathe
> at this angle to the earth.
> I am drawn
> to the tranquillity of soil,
> like a ballerina who cannot
> put her case with words.
>
> I have nothing but slow trains,
> the daily thud of vodka,
> eerie light from a skull,
> my diligence,

my sleep,

Forgive me:
I'm in a trance,
and this is not
an age of grace.
I live my life twice –
a fiercer, ripe, real,
sulky, sepulchral,
identical storm. (51)

The opacity of this poem is typical of Lew's more obscure poems, as is the feeling generated by it. There are few narrative details: where is the "beautiful annexe" and what is it annexed to? Why did the angel crush the speaker's shoulder? At what "angle to the earth" is the speaker? Why is soil tranquil and why is the speaker drawn to it? How is a "ballerina who cannot / put her case with words" like one who is drawn to soil? How can one live their life twice? What is the relationship between the words "fiercer, ripe, real, / sulky, sepulchral"? How can one live their life like an "identical storm"? And what is the relationship between the title and the poem? Yet despite this lack of information, the poem is seductive because of its dark and foreboding mystery, the suspense that is never relinquished, the undercurrent of fear and danger, and the unspoken threat of death.

If read according to a narrative and rational trajectory readers become frustrated, as is demonstrated by Gloria Yates' review. Following is her discussion of "Accountancy" (the poem is quoted in full in the review):

> Now the first lines are surprisingly perceptive. I think: Yes! Every sexual encounter begins with this tacit invitation to wrestle, the disguised experiments at mastery. Yes, she's right, and it is normal. And when that normal man becomes a commissionaire, I can accept it because he "set the forest alight" – that rage of love is recognisable. But by the second verse we know that this "normal" man is half mad, and the third deliberately tries to give the impression of a disjointed mind reflecting a fractured world. Well, for me the juggling wolves don't work. If they are there to prove the world's absurdity, they don't succeed. They are unbelievable, they are irritants. I love the last verse and its 'moody angel' which

> is totally convincing: I don't believe in angels any more than I believe in juggling wolves, but if angels existed they could be delightfully moody, whereas wolves …
>
> Now I'm caught in this absurdity, which is no doubt what the poet intended. A victory of sorts.

Yates battles with the poem/poet to make rational meaning. In the end her reading efforts are frustrated because she cannot discover the meaning of Lew's poems and thus she feels defeated. Yates acknowledges that this rational search for meaning is not the only way to read poetry. She suggests that reading via emotion is an important alternative, "[a] poem that lacks meaning may yet convey a richness, an emotion", but this option does not work for Yates' reading of Lew's poetry because her reading framework expects narrative.


## *Violence and War*

Given that the quality of emotion of Lew's poetry is powerful and the predominant tonality of feeling is dark and foreboding, a further critical question is why is it that Lew's poetry is profoundly violent and disturbing? Why are there so many poems about war? Certainly there are violent poems related to murder and other crimes, but there are also an unusual number of poems where violence is related to war: in "Snow and Gold" the speaker belongs to a "troupe" which is attempting to evade "the army" (30-31); in "Red", with its epigraph by Lenin, those at war leave their "machines / at night, and everywhere hidden wires had /only to be touched" (52); in "Pocket Constellations" "men with amputated limbs" arrive "on numberless lorries" after being "shelled all day" (54-55); in "Fine Weather of the Siege" the "guards had fled", "a soldier hid behind / a horse's corpse" (63-65). "Berchtesgaden" commences:

> She tells a strange story of Hitler's love astrology
> She saw Goebbels with a red weal on his face
> She says Hess is an addict of heroin
> And says of Himmler *He still suffers from the effects of*
>   *venereal disease contracted when he was only*

> *a lad of twenty*
> Coarse Goering is always cracking jokes
> Contrary to popular belief, the Fuhrer is a late riser (8).

In comparison with other new nineties poetry the violence of Lew's poetry and her focus on war is unprecedented[1].

Kris Hemensley's review of *The Wild Reply* "catalogues" the "effects" of this unusually violent tone, commenting that Lew's poetry is characterised by a "vocabulary of illness, death, misery, violence, of hankering after the otherwise and the elsewhere, of darkness and its emotional pallet" (79). Hemensley does not approve of what he suggests is an "obsessive repetition of tone" and, as previously mentioned, dismisses Lew's poetry as "postmodern lyricism which disports as (sic: us) and delights in its hermeticism" (78). He suggests that this dark tone arises because Lew is influenced by "the surrealism surviving contemporary American practice, thus Ashbery, Palmer, Coolidge, Tate and behind them what's left of the philosophising Wallace Stevens" (78). However, unlike Peter Boyle's poetry which demonstrates a praiseworthy surrealist influence, Hemensley suggests, Lew's poetry is an example of surrealism which "has been banalised by contemporary ideology for which imagination is but another specious authority" (78). Hemensley reproves Lew's poetry because, unlike Boyle's poetry, it offers him no "light", no hope:

> To leave ourselves is to love the world, warts and all; is to try once again to approach the epic enterprise with no more than pipes and lyre, the lyric in other words which everywhere else accepts capitulation before the enormity of the task but here takes its courage in hand and sings of everywhere and all at once. (78)

In contrast, Lew's poetry is grounded in a dark "pessimism" which leads him to ask "with Paul Celan in mind, is the world so monstrous that only poetic codification can support its telling?" (79). Hemensley's negative criticism finds two main problems with

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[1] Since writing this chapter Ian McBryde's poems on the Holocaust, *Domain*, have been published. Jacob Rosenberg writes about war and the Holocaust but his poems are not violent and dark.

Lew's poetry: the obscurity (or lack of "sensible declaration") and the pervasive dark tone. In the context of Hemensley's review, his use of the term (and phrase) "that postmodern", signposts a value-laden critical framework which dismisses (as it names) postmodernism. That is, unlike the way Hassan characterises the postmodern in his list of differences between modernism and postmodernism (*The Postmodern Turn*), Hemensley's critical scaffolding perceives postmodernism in a way that resonates with Frederic Jameson's theories (*Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*): empty, superficial, meaningless, pretentious, self-annihilating, nihilistic et cetera. Similarly, McCauley's complaint of "postmodern indulgence" is accompanied by his complaint of "struggling with the bleak surrealism, in a kind of psychological darkness" (64).

Lew's poems are dark and violent, and many are pessimistic as Hemensley claims. There is little "light" or hope in "Thirty Versts" as stanza five demonstrates:
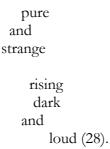
> We live here on earth but we are already
> half gone: how shameful and how terrifying.
> I wear your cross on my grey tea gown.
> Even in our house the child was born suffering. (50)

However, it is inaccurate to claim that all of Lew's poems are pessimistic for there are moments of "light", contrary to Hemensley's claim, and these are revealed through the strength of the characters. As suggested of "The True Dark Town" the character of this traumatic drama does not demonstrate a nihilistic approach to life, but a strong determination to survive which can only be possible with hope in the future. Like the subject of "The True Dark Town", the subject in "The Peaks" is involved in a struggle (although the details of the event are less clear) (15). In this poem, the subject struggles with the "slow work" of riding across rivers and over mountains with "rations rolled in bundles on our heads", threatening "Dingoes came and took and dangled among the dark leaves", and the travel is difficult, "sometimes pathways for our horses' hooves

would fit into / a baby's hand" and dangerous, "dawn making the valley a wet tomb".

And yet, in the face of this struggle the subject feels hope, "I wonder if love can be born

so close to the hills", and acknowledges the beauty of the world, "we breathed the forest

air and heard the sound of streams".  The scene is indeed bleak in "Sinking Song" for

"All the vanished animals weep, / and cities, built merely to fall, / drown in birds" and

yet it is nihilistic because there is hope:

> Come, trust the world – it's still night,
> and the moon wishes to dissipate,
> and earth groans under its weight of mice,
> and God has given us everything,
> everything (47).

Although the subject in "The Understudy" describes their soul as "a black sea of dots

and shadows", there is hope, "Stay with me in this wonderful country: / we are right

beside the crossroads, / where I believe I will be free" (52).  There is much darkness and

violence "But still there is hope in a light place" ("Pali" 91) and those light places are

where beauty lives: "The children herding cows were so beautiful" ("Light Tasks" 58);

"There's a beautiful sun and three deserts, / Awe bursting in sacred air" ("Sugar King"

30).  There is a celebration of the beauty of the sunset which graphically presents the

"Remnant of Sunset" (like a concrete poem):

>     To be born
>    with a sound
>      but always
>       float
>   on a breath
>
>       to sing
>     on the breath
>    and
>          on
>        the word
>
>    to see
>       you
>         in arctic
>        light

```
        pure
        and
      strange

        rising
        dark
      and
          loud (28).
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Other poems which celebrate the beauty of nature include "Pleiades" (29), "New Moon" (31), "Pond" (32), "The Last Colours" (33), and "Neptune Street" (47).

Lew's poems are not all 'sweetness and light'[2], but nor are they demonstrative of the modern form of nihilism. Lew's poems offer a postmodern form of nihilism which, in contrast to modernist nihilism, involves the "overcoming of the *desire* to overcome nihilism itself" (Woodward). Modern and postmodern nihilism are differentiated by their different attitudes toward nihilism and the world: a modernist view is steeped in the negatives of life, it looks forward to an imagined time like the 'golden' past, it is driven by the (false) promise of enlightenment and is rationally organised; a postmodern view perceives the negatives of life, acknowledges and even accepts these negatives as part of life, but it does so without accepting defeat or annihilation. The postmodern perspective is the type of attitude that drives Lew's characters. In this light, Lew's poetry resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's positive postmodern ethics because it offers 'novel ways' of thinking and living in the chaotic, dangerous and uncertain postmodern world. It is an ethical approach that is not self-defeating or self-annihilating, but nor does it promise an end to struggle. This attitude provides Lew's characters with the strength and determination to survive. Rather than clinging to false promises of a 'perfect' or enlightened future, Lew's characters are profoundly grounded in the present moment and this immediacy infuses the poems with intense dramatic power. For Lew's

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[2] Matthew Arnold's famous description of literary perfection in *Culture and Anarchy*.

characters, to live another day, see the sunrise and sunset is enough to give them the will to struggle on.

The world of Lew's poetry is guided not by rationality but by emotion. Lew does not use normative, linear narrative strategies to portray a 'normal' world picture; her poetry is attuned to the emotional world of the characters. In *Modernity and the Holocaust* Zygmunt Bauman discusses the relationship between Modernity, the Enlightenment project and the Holocaust, and suggests that the rationality of the former plays itself out in the latter. That is, the rationality of the Enlightenment project becomes the horror of the Holocaust. Rather than use fear to manage the death camps, the SS troops employed rationality:

> to found their order on fear alone, the SS would have needed more troops, arms and money. Rationality was more effective, easier to obtain, and cheaper. And thus to destroy them, the SS men carefully cultivated the rationality of their victims. (203)

The Holocaust was "more than a deviation from an otherwise straight path of progress, more than a cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of the civilized society . . . the Holocaust was not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything . . . it stands for", the Holocaust was driven by the very same principles which governed Modernity and Enlightenment – rationality (7). As Bauman suggests, it is impossible to separate the "rationality of evil" from "the evil of rationality" (202). As the 1990s end and the twenty-first century begins, the balance between emotional and rational approaches to society have become once again out-of-kilter. In Australia the guiding principles of rational efficiency have returned with a vengeance in the form of economic rationalism and unethical immigration policy. It is time for a poetics which reminds us of the importance of emotion and feeling.

### Personal and Postmodern: Lew's "precarious relationship with violence"

Certainly Lew's poetry can be defined as postmodern, but such a definition does not explain why a dark and violent tone predominates. During our discussion/interview in Melbourne, I asked Lew why she thought her poetry was dominated by violent, dark tones, to which she replied that she had a "precarious relationship with violence" (interview). I asked if the violent worlds of her poems are intended to reflect the violence of the world we live in, to which she replied: "It's [the world of the poems] not a world I live in; it's a world I'm fearful of and thankful that I don't live in." Lew commented that she feels "guilty" because while others suffer from an overabundance of violence, her life is free of violence.

I also asked why there were so many poems focusing on the experience of war. Lew then added that she feels her relationship with violence and war is somehow related to her family history and her Jewish ancestry. Lew commented that she feels "guilty" because she has "got it so good and yet it was such a silent part of my growing up". Emma's family history is the Holocaust. Her family were living in Austria at the time of Hitler's reign; her grandmother was the only family survivor. Perhaps realising that her story would die with her, Lew's grandmother Greta Wahl, dictated a summary of her life to Lew's mother Frances/Franzi, just before her death. The twelve-page summary tells the story of Greta Wahl and in particular her life during the Holocaust:

> I had a bad time then. My husband was Polish, and there was no Polish Embassy, so he couldn't get an exit permit. So he left by foot, he went to Belgium where he had relations. It was dreadful in Vienna then. We knew about the Concentration Camps. One night – it was called 'Judenheaus' – when the Nazis visited every house in Vienna, taking the Jews away. I knew they were coming, Edith was ten and Franzi was 2 [Greta's children]. My husband had already gone. I dressed the children up very warm, in two pairs of knickers each,

and waited. But when the Nazis came to the apartments, the caretaker said there were no Jews living there.

The Red Cross organised Childrens' transport to safe countries. I had to decide whether to keep the children with me or to let them go. A lot of people decided not to break up their families. Many people could not understand how I could send away my children. Edith went in May . . . to Bristol, to foster parents. My brother Erwin was also already in Bristol, but he could not keep my children as he was a refugee. Edith went to very nice people – the husband was a university teacher in Maths. And Franzi went in August. She was just 3, she sat in the train and didn't know what was happening. I can't describe my feelings. I went back to the flat alone. I sold our furniture. I don't want to remember what it was like then.

I got out with a Stateless Passport – I had to queue and queue – it's terrible to remember. I sent one big suitcase to my brother Erwin. I left Vienna at the end of August and went to Belgium. I met my husband there, the next day I left for England, that was the 1$^{st}$ of September, 2 days before war broke out. I had ten shillings in my pocket, I spoke English not very well. I remember I first went to London and got a train to Bristol, to my brother. I saw Edith, but the lady Franzi was with said I shouldn't see Franzi, as she feared she'd start crying again. I did see her when she was asleep. She was with the family of a solicitor; they lived in the next street to the family Edith was with.

. . .

I got letters from my father in Vienna, he was taken to a concentration camp in '42, where he died at about 80. And my twin Hans also went to Thereseinstadt Concentration Camp, and died later in Belsen. I stopped hearing from Ulti [her husband] in '42, before the Nazis caught him. They took him to Belsen, where he died.

. . .

I had a stroke in '78, Frances looked after me for seven years at home. Before the stroke I helped her bring up the children, then they all looked after me. They visit me now every day. They are all so good to me.

It is to her grandmother and mother that Lew dedicated her first collection: "For the memory of my mother, Frances Lew, and my grandmother, Greta Wahl" (vi). Just as Alison Croggon seriously began writing poetry when her first child was born, and an important connection between her poetry and mothering (in all its complexities) ensued, Emma Lew seriously began writing poetry when her mother died (interview), and a connection between her poetry and her violent family history has ensued. Thus, the violent and dark emotion and feeling of Lew's poetry can be understood in relation to a

subconscious psychological response to the Holocaust. Although Lew's poems are not explicitly about the Holocaust or her family's experience of the Holocaust, the predominant tone of violence and the unusual number of poems concerning war can be understood as a subconscious permeation of the Holocaust.

The effect of the Holocaust on later generations of Jewish families has only recently begun to be investigated and thus it is an area that little is known about. In these studies, Holocaust survivors and their families are defined as "post-catastrophe families" (Rosenthal 572). Lew's grandmother would be defined as a first-generation survivor of the Holocaust, her mother belongs to the second generation or children of Holocaust survivors, and Lew is of the third generation or one of the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. There are almost 2500 psychological studies of Holocaust survivors (Krell and Sherman), and a "vast literature on how the second generation has been greatly affected by their parents' experiences during the war" (Ganz 3). Studies of the third generation have only just begun, as Elissa Ganz states in her doctoral dissertation of 2002, there are only two or three on the third generation (11) and they constitute "a very neglected and highly needed area of study" (10). Ganz's study, *Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, looks at whether the third generation "exhibit symptoms similar to their grandparents in adulthood", whether they "display symptoms similar to the first and second generation (anxiety, depression, psychosomatization)", and "examine[s] if a greater general fear lies in the grandchildren of survivors, as the legacy of the Holocaust may have transmitted dangers and fears of the world that non-Holocaust surviving families do not experience to the same degree" (11).

Studies of the third generation reveal that intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust continues decades after its cessation (Ganz). One study of a third generation

boy (the patient) found a "parallel, both qualitative and temporal, between the patient's

symptom complex and that of his grandmother's" and suggests that the "symptoms were

akin to the concentration-camp-survivor syndrome" (as described by other studies of

concentration camp survivors) (Rosenthal 572). Ganz's study concludes that the

differences between the third generation and the control group "did not differ as much

as was predicted, [but] there was some support for the hypotheses" (107). Pertinent to

Lew's poetry are the hypotheses that claim that the third generation will demonstrate

increased levels of fear (36), "view the world as a dangerous place" (like the children of

Holocaust survivors) (36), and reveal negative characteristics (including "hostility",

"aggression", and "rage") (42). When I asked Lew if she was aware of any other third

generation artists or writers, she replied that she was not and added:

> I think it may be true that my own family history connects to my writing. The
> poems are very conscious of the dangerousness of the world, of doom and
> menace, and human helplessness and limitedness. I don't know if this is nihilism.
> I don't wish for destruction, the world just seems frightening and sad and I am
> powerless. The poems say this.

Even for those grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, like Lew, who grew up with silence

and a family that did not discuss their history, an "unconscious transmission of traumatic

imagery" can occur (Snider qtd. in Ganz 10) so that "[i]magery of the Holocaust is

inexplicably present" (Snider qtd. in Ganz 19). In her work on the transgenerational

effects of trauma in Australia's Indigenous communities, Judith Atkinson draws upon the

theories of the transpersonal psychologist Stanislav Grof to explicate the mysterious or

unexplainable ways trauma is transmitted across generations:

> He believes that we have a genetic imprint or cellular memory, perhaps in some
> way related to Jung's collective unconscious (1964). He states, however, that "we
> know nothing about the human psyche", underlining how much we still have to
> learn in our consideration of traumatic imprints on human beings across
> generations. Grof links human experiences across the biographical into the
> transpersonal. His work is relevant in understanding traumatisation in Aboriginal
> peoples because of the close relationship between the corporeal and non-
> corporeal world in Aboriginal ways of being in the world. In acknowledging the
> essence of *spirit* in the continuity of birth, death and rebirth in human activity,

> Grof has coined the term "spiritual emergency" to describe the condition that occurs as human trauma experiences across generations emerge in individuals and in social groups in the present, often a times of crisis, with the potential to create further traumatisation. (87-88)

Marcella Polain (Singaporean born of Armenian and Irish parents) in the epigraph to her poem "immigration" acknowledges the reality of a type of "cellular knowledge": "*Being born of those who have fled oppression means being born with acute, cellular knowledge of such oppression – knowledge that is as physical as blood*" (*Dumbstruck* 10). Despite the absence of scientific proof, "cellular memory" or "cellular knowledge" is a documented reality for some.

Evidence of this unconscious transmission is not restricted to psychosis, for it can also be evident in dreams and fantasies (Barocas qtd. in Ganz 25), and I would add, artistic work like poetry. Ganz's study suggests that rather than producing psychological disturbance "most of this generation has had the capacity and space to take some of their family's pain and suffering, and used it as motivation (for some conscious and for some unconscious) to move forward and achieve" (97). As a granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, Lew belongs to a third generation who have begun to present their stories, their "reactions to the Holocaust":

> Other "third-gens" have expressed their heritage creatively, like 24-year-old novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, whose forthcoming "Everything is Illuminated" (Houghton Mifflin) is about a young man's search for the woman who hid his grandfather from the Nazis, and filmmaker Jonathan Gruber, whose award-winning 1998 tribute to his grandmother, "Pola's March," documents her return-trip to Poland leading a March of the Living group. (Keys)

Artists belonging to the third generation have been united with survivors and those of the second generation in the anthology and exhibition *Bittersweet Legacy: Creative Responses to the Holocaust* (Brody). In Australia the Melbourne Playback Theatre Company staged an "interactive commemoration" utilising "movement, mime, dialogue and music" which "showed the resonance of the Holocaust in the lives of the third generation" (Klein). In interview with Lisa Keys, third-generation Jodi Rosensaft replies to the question: "'Will

there be writers, poets, activists and painters among the third generation? Of course'" (Keys). While it is not difficult to map the importance of the Holocaust in the art of those of the third generation who write explicitly about the Holocaust, it is a different situation in the case of those who do not consciously engage with their family history or the Holocaust. Rather than suggesting that there *will* be artists among the third generation, it is more correct to say that there *are* artists among the third generation but we are only just beginning to realise their existence and the role the Holocaust plays in their art. Within this context, McCauley's claim that Lew's poetry is mere "postmodern indulgence" and lacks the necessary "courage, intelligence, commitment, persistence" (65), becomes problematic. Furthermore, his claim that a "poet should do something, or see it in action, or be immersed in the subject of their poem, rather than read about it in books or on computers. A poet must experience, rather than simulate reality or rely on second-hand information" (65), is particularly controversial given that the third generation of the Holocaust could never experience the Holocaust except through a simulated process. The use of the term 'postmodern' (nihilism, lyricism, or any other descriptive term used in conjunction with postmodern) negates thorough critical consideration of the complexities of Lew's poetry. It also allows for a too easy dismissal of issues we know very little about.


### *Afterword*

I was reminded of the relevance and complexities of Lew's poetry in our post-Holocaust world when the ABC's Compass screened a documentary film by Marc Radomsky, *Claiming the Memory – Who Owns the Legacy?* (2004). This film documents the first group of young Australian Jews on The March of the Living to the concentration camps of Poland. Previous to this participation Australian Holocaust survivors and Jewish rule prohibited Australian Jews from taking part in the march-rite. This prohibition had been

in place for *twelve years*. Thus, we might ask: why has it been lifted now? What is different about this moment in time? David Prince, a Holocaust survivor who accompanies the young Australians to Poland, states that he believes it is important for third-generation Jews to physically experience the Holocaust by visiting the concentration camps. This suggests a different type of handing-down or passing-on of the Holocaust legacy; unlike the stories told to the third generation, this experience becomes their experience. Part of the reason the third generation are so important is because Holocaust survivors are ageing and in time there will be no survivors left to pass on the legacy. However, not all Holocaust survivors agree that young Jews should participate in The March of the Living nor visit concentration camps. One survivor spoke strongly about the stories being the right of the survivors and not wanting the younger generation to take this right away. At present there is a struggle amongst Jewish peoples about who has the right to the Holocaust legacy, and the younger generation, especially the third generation, are questioning their responsibilities and how the Holocaust should be remembered. Lew's poetry and other third-generation Jewish artists have a role to play in this remembering that is not remembering. Perhaps in the near future third-generation Jews will be in a position to gain insight into what Grof calls "cellular memory" (87) and how subjectivity and identity are affected by transgenerational violence that is not remembered in any traditional sense of remembering.

## Conclusion

Lew's poetics engages with the emotions and feelings of subjectivity and what it means to be a subject living in a world permeated by violence and overshadowed in unknowable ways by the violence of the past. Lew's Jewish ancestry and the murder of her family in the Holocaust, give the violence of her poetry a personal context which refutes

accusations of postmodern nihilism. While Lew's aesthetic practices and methodologies

can be described as postmodern, the powerful quality of emotion and tonality of feeling

challenge the claim that postmodern art is devoid of feeling, or as Frederic Jameson

famously defines one of the ailments of postmodern art, suffers from the "waning of

affect" ("Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" 72). Lew uses

postmodern techniques like discontinuous and fragmented narratives not to tell a story

but to create powerful feeling and emotion. Certainly the "link between language and

emotion is ultimately mysterious", as Haskell reminds us, but it is a link pivotal to Lew's

poetics and thus it is of vital importance to a critical discussion of her poetry. Lew's

poetry challenges criticism to engage with the quality of emotion and the tonality of

feeling which are issues deemed unacceptable by conventional criticism because they are

not part of a rational and objective discourse.


Despite the predominance of violence, the permeation of a dark and foreboding tonality

of feeling, Lew's poetry is not nihilistic in a modernist way. The characters in Lew's

poems are often involved in terrifying and life-threatening situations and their will and

determination to survive is indicative of strong characters driven by a desire for life.

Lew's characters acknowledge that the world is a confusing and chaotic place but they do

not pretend that beyond this world is an enlightened one. Uncertain of whether there

will be enough food to eat or whether death waits around the next corner, Lew's

characters push on against the odds and strive for life. Many of the specific details of the

'trials and tribulations' the characters endure are absent from the poems but the feelings

experienced during these ordeals and the feelings evoked by an awareness of the deeply

felt traumas are palatable and 'deeply moving'.

At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries the world has been devastated by wars and natural disasters, but whatever the details the effects are always the same: violent and terrifying. Watching these events unfold across television every day and night there is the danger of indifference or a symptomatic "waning of affect" due to the overabundance and domination of information. Lew's poetry offers a positive postmodern ethical approach by challenging indifference and reminding us to feel, to be emotional about what is going on, for to do otherwise is to ignore the world we live in and the people who need help. Poetry might make 'nothing happen', as Auden lamented, but if Lew's poems can reignite deep emotion and feeling, then there is hope rather than indifference.

# *CONCLUSION*

New nineties poetries are an eclectic assemblage of diverse styles, tonalities, themes, languages, perceptions, approaches, and modalities. My use of the term 'new nineties poetry' is a general one; useful for the purpose of my study of poetry written for the page by poets who published their first collection between 1990 and 2000. There are many more new nineties poets than those focused on in this study and other critics may have chosen different poets to concentrate on. By focusing on a few poets rather than many, my critical approach has in some ways formed a new nineties canon, but it has also enabled the production of in-depth and thorough critical engagements rather than a limited overview. A useful overview has been provided through the issue-centred focus of each chapter and many poets are included in that discussion. However, at this stage in the critical culture of poetry, overviews in the form of reviews predominate while serious poetry criticism is becoming rare. As John Mateer states:

> We need critics who don't simply wish to provide an overview of the literature in which they are interested. We need critics who are actively engaged in investigating and elucidating the poetics of the writing and who wish to talk about the relationship between language and their life. ("The Postponement of Judgment" 49)

Each chapter addresses these concerns by attending to the poetics of the poets and the way that poetics is informed by the life of the poet.

Poetics is the 'implicit principles' or 'theory' which informs poetry (Preminger et al. 929) and as Philip Mead states in his paper, "Where is Poetics?" (unpublished version presented at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference June 2005): "[p]oetry can often best be understood in relation to the poetics that have helped to constitute it" (12). Despite being such a helpful way of understanding and reading poetry, Mead points out that "poetics has tended to escape the disciplinary grids of

literary criticism, theory, literary history, and even creative writing" and although it has survived "in the more rhizomatic, unofficial institutions and communities of poetry . . . it tends to get ignored" (1). This study adds to the field of poetics and demonstrates that although these relatively new poets do not present their poetics in the style of "formal treatises" (4) their poetry is none the less guided by their ideas or principles about the essential qualities of poetry. It is not surprising that these poets have not produced the equivalent of Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595), not only because they are relatively new, but as Mead suggests the "contemporary poetics 'in Australia'" (3) doesn't "rely on any of the polemical and even national inflections" which characterise the history of poetics, because the "thinking about form and language that digitisation (or computerisation in its myriad applications) allows has created an expanding, networked environment of e-writing and e-poetics" (13). Throughout my study of new nineties poetries I have made extensive use of electronic communication and much of the information about a poet's poetics has been gathered via email discussions. One needs to be careful of not judging this information less important because it is not in the form of a formal treatise for, as Mead suggests, electronic communication enables "a new set of relations between writing cultures, including the institutions of poetry, and the critical-scholarly culture" (14) and is vital to the creation and generation of contemporary poetics.

The issues that form the focus of each chapter are issues that are important to many new nineties poets, and they are also the issues that drive the particular poet's poetics. In the chapter on embodiment it is demonstrated that Alison Croggon's and Rebecca Edwards' poetics are informed by their need to *write the body*. Each of these poets discusses their experience of the profound connection between the body and writing and in particular, the connection between pregnancy, motherhood and writing. As a South African living

in Australia and an avid traveller to other countries, John Mateer's personal identity and experience inform a poetics driven by an engagement with the issues of cultural difference. For Peter Minter, American Language poetries are a vital influence on his poetics in the "Empty Texas" series. Minter's poetics is informed by this influence and he shares their avant-garde desire to push language to its limits, and to continually experiment with form and language. However, rather than a simple adoption of the poetics of American Language poetry, or that typical avant-garde response of negation (*Five Faces of Modernity* 276-275, in Conte *Unending Design* 10), Minter leads the way in experimental language poetry in Australia by developing a post-Language poetics which involves simultaneously working with and against the poetics of American Language poetry. Minter's approach involves what Conte describes as "mutation", "renovation", "fusion" and "synthesis", which is typical of a postmodern approach (*Unending Design* 11). Minter's post-Language poetics involves a respectful attitude towards difference: he acknowledges, accepts and at times celebrates different poetic modes. This approach is also evident in the way Minter works towards building poetry communities. As the new nineties poet with (relatively) the most cultural capital, Minter has used his position to encourage respect amongst different poets, and advocated the acknowledgement, acceptance and celebration of different poetic modes. Emma Lew's poetics is driven by the violence of emotions and her belief in the necessity of emotionally provocative poetry. Lew's poetry taps into the violence that permeates society at the end of the twentieth century, and from a psychological perspective the violence of Lew's poems can be related to her Jewish ancestry and the Holocaust. Lew is of the third generation or one of the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and current studies of this group reveal that intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust is real phenomena (Ganz). At this stage this area of psychology is quite new, but there is evidence that intergenerational transmission reveals itself in a perception of the world as a "dangerous place" (Ganz 36)

and in the predominance of negative characteristics including "hostility", "aggression", and "rage" (Ganz 36-42). The art of this generation is an even newer area for consideration but I suggest that Lew's poetry demonstrates that intergenerational transmission reveals itself in the predominance of violence that permeates her poetry.

## Subjectivity

Within the eclectic modalities and the divergent issues of language, embodiment, cultural difference and violence, are the interconnected and interrelated concerns of identity and subjectivity. All of the poetry I have discussed is concerned with subjectivity or identity – not the achievement or even obtainment of identity but the *questioning* of subjectivity. These poets attempt to understand what identity means in our contemporary world. Questions are asked: what is the relationship between the subjectivities involved in motherhood and giving birth *and* writing poetry? what subject positions does language allow/create/destroy? how can diasporic subjects find/make a home? what is the relationship between Indigenous subjects and alien subjects? what role does language/land/body have in this relationship? how is subjectivity affected by the violence of our world? what are violent subjectivities? Rather than offering definitive answers to these questions new nineties poets Alison Croggon, Rebecca Edwards, John Mateer, Emma Lew and Peter Minter and others, offer 'wild replies' (to borrow the title of Lew's first collection).

Each poet evokes a different response to subjectivity. For Croggon, the subjectivities of mother and poet are inseparable in their fluid dance of language and love. While for Edwards, these subject positions are linked by violence and pain. These differences emerge in different poetic styles, and reveal different approaches to subjectivity. Croggon's embodied poetry strives towards the becoming-imperceptible of subjectivity, a

space where a reified sense of identity is negated. Croggon's poetry embraces the dream and desire of child's play – an embodied space and way of becoming in the world which is free of pre-arranged and anaesthetised ways of thinking and feeling. In Edwards' poetry subjectivity moves through the becoming-animal of childbirth not to become-imperceptible but to rewrite women's mythology and take back her body and herstories. Peter Minter's post-Language poetics in the "Empty Texas" series playfully engages with the Language project of dismantling an ego-centred sense of subjectivity and the omnipresent 'I' and moves into an investigation of mobile subjectivity. Focusing on the movement of subjects as they relate, subjectivity becomes sensually embodied in Minter's later series, *Morning, Hyphen*. Predominantly written from diasporic and hybrid subject positions, John Mateer's poetry engages with many different cultures to courageously create the space for a politics of hybridity. Mateer's journey of the hybrid subject involves meetings and clashes with different cultures including Australia's Indigenous cultures and Indonesian cultures. In Mateer's poetry these meetings of different and differing cultures frequently foreground "complicated entanglement rather than identity" and "painful moments at which communications seems unavoidably to *fail*", as postcolonial theorist Ien Ang characterises hybridity (3, 179). Engagement with different cultures is an attempt to assist the diasporic subject connect to the land of his new home but finally it is an embodied sense of subjectivity and a freeing of identity that helps the subject 'become' with his environment. Subjectivity in Emma Lew's dark and violent poems is often fragmented or shattered as she unearths the experience of victims of violence or perpetrators of violence. And yet, Lew does not strive to solve the problems of these shattered lives nor seek some form of subjective unity. On the contrary, Lew focuses on the emotions of violent and violated subjectivity in all its complexities to engage readers in these deeply felt worlds of chaos, madness, anxiety and fear.

My thesis suggests that new nineties poetries offer poetry criticism exciting challenges. Typical of the experience of the 'new', many reviewers shy away from the challenges of in-depth engagement with syntactical experiments or attempt to dismiss poems which enter unfamiliar realms. Indeed, much of the poetry discussed in my thesis is frequently strange and difficult, but it is also frequently seductive and enticing, intellectually sophisticated and surprising. Writing criticism on such difficult poetry has been made less problematic by the interconnected principles of immanence and eclecticism. Ensuring that my criticism always considers "things present in the works themselves" (Adorno 329) has simultaneously ensured that my critical approaches are appropriate. Necessarily as the "things" in the poetry changed and the poetic modalities altered, my critical approach changed. The issues I have focused on are not the only or definitive "things present in the works", but they are central concerns that demand critical attention. And as my discussions with the respective poets demonstrate, central concerns of the poetry are most frequently central to the poetics: Minter discusses the influence of Language poetry in his "Empty Texas" series; Croggon and Edwards discuss the interconnection of the corporeal experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, mothering and writing poetry; Mateer discusses his desire to connect with and understand different cultures, and laments that he does not have a country to go home to; and Lew states that poetry should make us feel deeply.

My criticism seeks to continue the dialogue generated during my study by continuing to work *with* new nineties poets and poetry in an eclectic spirit of engagement. New nineties poets do not want reductive and defining labels to categorise them into warring 'camps' or manageable 'schools', nor does their poetry deserve superficial commentary. Throughout my thesis I have deliberately chosen to respect these wishes not because I

feel obligated but because immanent and eclectic criticism is appropriate criticism for new nineties poetries.

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