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# *Between Text and Performance: Race and Gender in Contemporary Literatures*

**edited by Antonella Riem, Stefano Mercanti, Maria Paola Guarducci & Adriano Elia**

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**Sue Ballyn**

## Circling the Roundabout at Bangalow

I cannot remember where we were coming from, or maybe going to, but I do remember the beautiful countryside we were driving through. A roundabout lay ahead of us and, after a few minutes, I realised we were going round in circles and I asked why … "You don't recognise it, not even where we are?", "No, should I?" "Yes", came the firm answer. At that moment the penny dropped. I had just read the *Roundabout at Bangalow* by Shirley Walker and loved it, so much so, I had put it on the reading list for the following academic year[1]!

I first met Shirley while still a student in 1981. She, and her husband Les, arrived in Barcelona on the evening of the 23rd of February 1981, the night of the attempted coup by Colonel Antonio Tejero and other military high rankers! She and Les could not understand why the city streets were totally empty of both people and traffic. When they arrived at their hotel, nobody was at the reception desk. All the reception and main hall staff were crammed into the back office watching television! Eventually, they could check in after being told about exactly what was going on in the country.

I was later introduced to Shirley by her close friend Doireann MacDermott, Head of the English and German Department at the University of Barcelona, and who had founded what was then called Commonwealth Studies now Postcolonial, in Spain. We spent some time talking and I took to her immediately. Little was I to know that eventually, both Doireann and Shirley were to hatch plans that would directly involve myself.

Some time between 1981 and 1986 a good friend and colleague of Shirley's came to visit us in Barcelona. This was Julian Croft, a very talented poet and university Professor. I remember the wonderful lecture he gave to my English Poetry students and also the fact that we introduced him to Orujo or fire water. The name of the snifter in English is self-explanatory. On trying it, he observed "If I were to pour that on my back yard, it would ignite!". I later learned that Shirley had asked Julian to suss me out as a prospective candidate for an Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) familiarisation grant. The grant was also part funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The hatching being carried out by Shirley and Doireann MacDermott was close to completion! Around Easter of 1987, I received a letter inviting me to take up the Familiarisation Grant. Shirley signed it as the then president of ASAL.

I landed at Sydney Airport in July 1987 and made my way to the connecting flight to Launceston, Tasmania, where the yearly ASAL conference would take place. The small departure lounge was already half full when I arrived, and looking around, I guessed that many were conference delegates. Here, I was to meet people who would become mentors

[1] Walker, Shirley. 2003. Roundabout at Bangalow. St. Lucia (QLD): University of Queensland Press.

and firm friends over the years, Geoff Doyle and Bruce Bennett among them. Shirley quickly spotted me and soon introduced me to many people in the departure lounge. As Shirley used to say on one of our regular calls to each other, "You and I go back a long way". Tasmania fascinated me and was to become the focus of my research for some twenty years. So, thanks to Shirley, I made many friends and built up a network of contacts in Australia. Thanks also to her for opening up a research track that has become the *Neverending Story*[2].

Over the years, we spent quite some time together at conferences, and later, I became a yearly visitor to Byron Bay, which was not far from where Shirley lived. When time allowed, we saw each other. I particularly remember one EACLALS conference in Nice[3]. The Conference excursion was to a small village high up in the mountains behind the city. We were told there would be spectacular views down to Nice from there. I cannot remember the name of the place, as I think the experience has led me to forget it! Two coaches loaded up, and we travelled through the city, suburbs and later countryside for a while. Then, we began a steep climb up the mountainside. Shirley was sitting beside the window, which was a blessing given what we encountered. Deep in conversation, she turned towards me and basically had her back to the window. We were now into one hairpin bend after another on a very narrow road. The bends had to be negotiated in three or four manoeuvres. The first conference coach was ahead of us so we could see exactly what the driver had to do to get around the bends. At one stage, he pulled so far out that the back wheels just touched the edge of the road, leaving the back of the bus exposed to the precipice. I glanced over Shirley's shoulder, and there, right below us, was the wreckage of a car. It was not the only one we saw on our way up! Practically everybody on the bus had gone silent, and the sense of anxiety seemed almost palpable! Suddenly a voice said "Headlines tomorrow, the whole executive of EACLALS killed in bus accident" there was an explosion of laughter and up and up we went. When we got to the top, a colleague, Kathleen Firth, came over and said, "You know what the man in the little café there said? We are the first coaches ever to have come up here!" Later, some delegates were seen returning to base cross country down the steep slope!

Shirley was a truly extraordinary woman. She was incredibly demanding of herself with an exceptionally keen sense for self-criticism, which academia seems to have largely lost today. She did not mince her words when the occasion demanded straightforward speaking. Still, she was gentle, kind, affectionate, and generous to a degree, and she was loved and admired by many people both in Australia and Europe.

Shirley was brought up in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales and spent the last years of her life there. However, for reasons that will become evident, her heart and sense of home were for Armidale, where she lived through the most fulfilling years. It was here, during the Second World War that she trained as a teacher at Armidale Teachers' College. Could she possibly have foreseen that she would become renowned as a university lecturer and writer? Throughout her life and achievements, she remained humble and unpretentious. Little could she have known then that she would have a prestigious academic career, becoming the first person in her family to go to university: the University of New England.

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[2] Michael Ende. 1979. Stuttgart: Thienemann Verlag.

[3] EACLALS, The European Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies.

She won prizes both for her work as an undergraduate and postgraduate. Here, she was to become the first PhD candidate to defend a thesis in Australian Literature at the university[4]. Her thesis was on the work of Judith Wright. It was later published as *The Poetry of Judith Wright: A Search for Unity*[5]. To this day, I still think it is the most nuanced, sensitive yet critically insightful work on Wright's writing. She then became a tenured lecturer in the English Department at the University of New England, her *alma mater*.

There is no doubt in my mind that Shirley, together with Bruce Bennett, Veronica Brady, Laurie Hergenhan and John Barnes, formed the influential cohort of writers, critics and lecturers in Australian Literature that enthused students in Australia, China and Europe to study in the field. Shirley worked alongside Doireann MacDermott to spur Spanish students forward in the area. As a result, she became a regular visitor to Barcelona and Oviedo in Asturias.

However, Shirley had another broach on her jacket: she was a superbly talented creative writer. *The Ghost at the Wedding: A True Story* is probably my favourite if pushed to choose only one[6]. It won the 2009 Asher Literary Award, was nominated for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Non-fiction in 2010, and won the Nita B. Kibble Literary Award in the same year. The book received accolade after accolade; poignant, powerful, written with great intelligence and lyricism. It is indeed all those things and so many more. It follows in the narrative line of the autobiography *Roundabout at Bangalow,* a personal memoir but this time a biography of Shirley's mother-in-law Jess over three generations. It covers two of Australian history's most shattering events: the First and Second World Wars. For me, what makes it so different is that the book is so much more about the harrowing lives of the women left behind. The battles fought on the home front to feed children, help the war effort, maintain hope for their mens' return yet the wrenching fear that, at some time, the fateful telegram would arrive announcing the death of a husband, brother, uncle, nephew, boy-friend. The list is long.

The work does not spare the reader by enthroning the female voice in romantic rhetoric but describes war in harsh, unrelentingly brutal terms; the horror of the battle of Gallipoli against the Turks or the Kokoda Track campaign, an important series of battles fought by the Australians in the Second World War with the average age of soldiers standing at eighteen. The research behind the book is meticulous and wide ranging and took Shirley as far back as the Boer War out of which came work on Breaker Morant. *A Ghost at The Wedding* has thus become one of the most insightful memoirs of Australia's contribution to both World Wars and is both a major work of Australian Literature and of Australian History.

Shirley Walker's death sees the passing of a major academic figure and writer and an immensely determined woman who helped many like myself.

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[4] Shirley and I shared in common defending a thesis on Australian Literature. In my case the first PhD on the subject in Spain. I used to tell Shirley how angry I would get when researching for the thesis, and people would ask what I was doing. When I replied Australian Literature, they would remark that they did not know there was any!

[5] Walker, Shirley. 1980. *The Poetry of Judith Wright: a Search for Unity*. Melbourne: Edward Arnold.

[6] Walker, Shirley. 2009. *A Ghost at The Wedding: A True Story*. Camberwell (VIC): Viking Penguin.

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**Antonella Riem Natale**

# Picking Every Heartbeat. A Silence Approaching Music. An Imaginary Interview with David Malouf

Yes, all is set, ready for our interview! Finally, after having known each other and being friends for about forty years – David and I had met before 1985 in Europe, at a conference on Australian Literature (neither of us remembers where), we decided that *yes*, it was a good moment for me to interview him, while visiting him, right after his birthday and planning to celebrate mine *together*. My cell phone is *on* and I have tapped the right button for video recording, after having briefly tested it myself. We delve into our interview with the seriousness and enthusiasm of an Aries with a Sagittarius rising and a Pisces, cusp with Aries, which make both of us fiery, movable, sometimes electric and impatient, but always loving, caring and kind-hearted friends. Long time ago, with great generosity and charm, David let me enter his world, offering his gift of friendship, full of empathy, understanding, love, laughter and care. I am very grateful and truly happy for his long-lasting and bountiful gift.

The fact is also that, across the years, David's work has been a very significant and central focus of many of my critical studies, first and foremost as a student, reading and writing in order to learn something about his poetic and imaginative word as it manifests in all forms of art and life. This to me is the utmost goal of scholarship and the arts, in spite or beyond all the theoretical gear that too often now encumbers our critical analyses.

As it happens, in the past year and a half, I have been also writing a book on him, which is almost ready for press. Actually, I am reading the proofs while jetlag strikes my sleep patterns (but helps opening further my creative and imaginative avenues) on the 28th floor of David's flat with a magnificent view on the beach and the Pacific Ocean on the Gold Coast, the so-called 'Surfers' Paradise'. The roaring ocean resounding underneath (and within) us is a perfect reminder of our vulnerability as human beings, and the necessity for partnering with one another with love, kindness, and laughter, a lot of laughter and playful teasing …

The constant sound of waves can feel intimidating at first, almost scary, but once you tune in to that vastness, which is in the end small, if compared to the immensity of the starry heavens above, with the Southern Cross reminding us of a *different* sky, remote from Italy, from 'home', or if we think even further, to the interconnected tapestry of galaxies which cross time and space … These quiet musings put us humans into our appropriate place. This magnificent web of life also speaks of our transience, of our smallness, while, at the same time, reminding us that, as David has his character Clem in "Great Day" (Malouf 2000) say, *all* heartbeats on the planet are honoured as important and recorded forever in what, according to a Hindu vision, recently confirmed by many scientific studies (Laszlo 2009) we might call *Akashic* memory:

> Out there – out there in space, I mean – there's a kind of receiver. Very precise it is, very subtle – refined. What it picks up, it's made that way, is heartbeats, just that. Every heartbeat on the planet, it doesn't miss a single one, not one is missed (Malouf 2000: 179).

While time passed, our heartbeats were steadily ticking (and tickling) with intense and joyous focus on the different topics we were touching. In our enthusiasm enthralling us both in what we were touching upon, neither of us thought that, maybe, I should check if all was going well with my cell video-recording.

Thus, when we finally paused to take breath and have a glass of water, I had a look and realised, to my utmost terror, that *nothing* had been recorded, apart from a very brief beginning. Oh what a terrible disaster! We must do this again, I will have to look through my notes, what can we do?

We were both frustrated and at the same time amused at the irony of the whole thing. Let's go for a walk on the beach, we said, and pick some seashells and small stones for our personal secret/sacred collections, let's follow the little white 'ghost' crabs[1], as they swiftly try to hide from our steps into their sandy homes at our passage, let's walk in the shallow ocean water, where it has less pulling power and is calmer and warmer to the feel of our naked and happy feet. Then, to celebrate our *missed* interview, we decide to go out for dinner at the Persian's Restaurant *Shiraz*, just round the corner, for some good salmon, spicy rice and veggies, and maybe cheer to our adventure with a good beer. So, we said, let's sleep over this terrible technological misdeed, and see what we could do about it all tomorrow, the next day.

The next day, after some (uncertain and tentative) propositions of doing the interview again, we both decided that *no*, we wouldn't do anything, we would go with the flow, follow the rhythm, be faithful to the music orchestrated by the universe for us. We would take this as a sign of destiny, as an admonishment, as a joke our trickster natures had played on both of us … Indeed a Magician's trick!

On my flight back to Italy, however, some other illuminations came to me. I still need to write a sort of "Imaginary Interview", I thought, picking up some of the topics we touched upon and sharing them of the pages of this 'poetics' of mine, for our online journal *Le Simplegadi*. And certainly I can draw upon some 'real', printed interviews of David, and some of my ideas and meditations on his work.

Shall we talk, for example, of the importance of everyday actions in David's work? Of the fact that these apparently simple moments always carry with them a deeper meaning, for they touch upon some kind of revelation illumining for us the whole story? As David says:

> The reason I'm particularly interested in those things – like shelling peas and all the rest of it – is because the body in a way discovers itself in doing certain things, and so does the mind. Often people in my books are not saying anything to one another –

[1] https://www.natura-pacific.com/ghosts-in-the-sand/ (consulted on 19/4/2024).

> they are communicating by doing something together … Ironically, as a writer, I am quite interested in non-verbal communication. Our bodies are sort of thinking things out a lot of the time or thinking themselves out through activity, and that is one of the reasons I am interested in those things (Turcotte 1990: 58).

Malouf's language is often solid and pragmatic, realistic one would say, describing everyday little acts, *realia* and realities, minutiae, small details, which however prepare the scene for sudden revelations, for silent understanding and mystical experience: "these most ordinary of moments, through Malouf's crafting, become extraordinary epiphanies" (Brennan 2011: 2).

In-between these grand reflections, we certainly as usual 'communicated by doing something together', while I prepared a good Italian slow-cooked traditional tomato sauce for our pasta, and David expressed his culinary art in a typical Maloufian *salade niçoise*, made with fresh tuna fish and very *al dente* green beans, plus eggs, cheese, tomatoes and anything else we might feel inspired to add.

Our 'Imaginary Interview' continued; we had talked of Italy and the *anni di piombo* period, especially in his novella *Child's Play* (1982), where an anonymous terrorist and the writer/professor he has to kill confront each other across the page, in the world of imagination and creativity, where, in the end, in spite of the fact that he will be assassinated, it is the writer who actually survives and *wins*, while the terrorist is absolutely powerless in his lack of true creative and dialogic *imagination*. As Neilsen says:

> the narrator-terrorist begins to discover, near the end of his assignment, that since language determines how we construct the world, we are in turn constructed by those who control language, in his case, by the famous author who is his intended victim, and by the media, who will report his act of terror. The terrorist's struggle is thus ultimately with language – the printed word (Neilsen 1996: 67).

The terrorist tries to imitate and mimic his *Master*, perfectly aware that he is unable to *create* like him:

> The terrorist's failure to find or make a valid place of being in language is tellingly revealed by the fact that the narrative of *Child's Play* completes itself after the death of its narrator. Language endures, it continues its work of unending articulation, in the absence of any given speaker (Randall 2007: 68).

This interaction between two male characters/protagonists takes me to my first topic of scholarly study, the theme of the double, back at the University of Queensland, while doing my Master in 1985. The terrorist and the writer, like all the other doubles who appear in David's work, represent a sort of inner dialogue between different aspects of the Self. Central to Malouf's narrative quest are his famous doubles: Johnno and Dante in *Johnno* (1975); Ovid and the Child, but also Ovid and Ryzak in *An Imaginary Life* (1978), the terrorist and the writer in *Child's Play* (1982); Jim and Ashley in *Fly Away Peter* (1985); Digger and

Victor in *The Great World* (1990); the lexicographer and the Aboriginal "Only Speaker of his Tongue" in the homonymous short story, in the collection *Antipodes* (1986) reissued in *The Complete Stories* (2007); Adair with Carney, and before that with Fergus and Virgilia in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996); Priam with Somax and then with Achilles; Achilles with Patroclus, and then with Priam and Hector (even if after Hector's death) in *Ransom* (2009) and many others. "In each of those stories what I'm interested in is a quality of relationship between those two characters, which can be worked out in terms of possibilities, which is free" (Davidson 1983: 277). Actually, in most of his novels, poems and stories, there is almost an obsession with the double. In his own words:

> For myself the interest of there being other male figures is really that they're all one character. That's the essential part of it. It's obviously a way of externalizing a dialogue or a series of revelations (Davidson 1983: 277).

Malouf's language makes us feel the poetic energy that gives shape to sound, interspersed with eloquent silence (Haskell 2014), where our bodies think themselves out through activity. Malouf comments thus on the musical and metaphorical qualities of his work:

> Musical, I think that's certainly true. But I think that's true of the way all my books are shaped. I don't usually think of the forward drive of the book as having to do with plot, but with exploration of things which are announced first, sometimes almost like metaphors in a poem, say. You then explore both ends of the metaphor and let those spawn other oppositions, other comparisons, and then explore those. I think that's the way almost all my books work, and I think I learned really to shape a novel the way I'd learned to shape a poem. I sometimes referred in the past to the books therefore having a kind of poetical structure in that kind of way, or musical, if one wanted to say that (Daniel 1996).

Malouf is a *rhapsodos*, a singer of 'woven words' interlacing life and light (Brennan 2011: 15)[2]. The aim of his singing, resounding and weaving of words is that of telling stories (in both poetry and prose), of inviting us into his imaginative journey, in order to experience aesthetic beauty and find deeper meanings for our lives, and the two are always conjoined:

> I stand and listen.
> Silence
> approaches. A silence approaching music
> (Malouf 2007: 22, ll. 18-20).

It is a language where "every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation. We knew that language once. I spoke it in my childhood. We must discover it again" (Malouf 1978: 98).

It is a kind of "lyric comprehensiveness, a boundaryless state in which the distinction

[2] See also: https://classics-at.chs.harvard.edu/classics3-egbert-j-bakker-rhapsodes-bards-and-bricoleurs-homerizing-literary-theory/ (consulted on 19/04/2024).

between subject and object, between the I and the not-I, is joyously dissolved" (Taylor 2000: 715). The joy of self-dissolution into the lyric meeting with the other is, I believe, one of the central aspirations in Malouf's work. This is found in his constant intent to *mythologise* the other in order to create a 'dialogical dialogue' (Panikkar 2007) with otherness and difference, to reach "new clarity of understanding, more integrated vision, a new sense of self and the world one inhabits" (Randall 2007: 9). As Malouf states in an interview:

> We have to find a way – I call it mythological – to bring out the link between us and our landscape, us and our cities, us and the lives we live. To do that, you have to give people, in books, something like a mythology that they can have, and you have to make it for them – it's not ready made – it has to be imagined (Copeland 1982, qtd. in Neilsen 1990: 2).

Behind Malouf's imagined mythology of *linking* in a partnership *Relation* Self and Other, his choice of words, describing inner and outer dimensions of life, the physical and spiritual worlds of his characters, there is a constant quest for a creativity that encourages the reader to perceive grandeur, concord, and peace, also in the face of grief, loss and disorder. There is an unceasing aspiration towards the highest ethical elements of humanity, in order to inspire and *teach* that is typically romantic.

Throughout his career, Malouf's focus has always been to experiment in different genres, in order to see how he could *fine-tune* the English language of the colonisers to Australia as a new/ancient land, which was not the home of certain metaphors created elsewhere, in another climate, another place, another socio-historical and cultural situation. This mythological quest led him to a constant exploration and testing of the limits of the English language to describe Australia, in order to create a new mythology, in a different English, which could respond to the language and its metamorphoses in *relation* to *place*, with a deep consciousness that Australia had already been mythologised by Aboriginal Dreaming, Songlines and story-lines:

> We have always read [Australia], or misread it, in terms of the landscape we carry in our heads and of the language we brought, a language that did not grow out of what was here. […] What we had was a highly developed language and names for everything, and a reality in front of us that did not fit. […] I have been fascinated, in all the books I've written, by that business of naming, of making the thing by speaking its name. But here we spoke the name, and what appeared was something entirely unexpected. The gap between our language and our landscape fascinates me, […] that mystery of naming things is central to my notion of language (Kavanagh 1986: 185).

The construction of his fictional realities in these terms is, in my opinion, one of the best qualities of Malouf's creation – poetic correspondences, analogies, metaphors, symbolisms full of rhythm and sound. It gives substance and authenticity to what happens in his texts and characters. At the same time, in the echoes and ripples of meaning he creates, he makes us understand and *feel* things at the deepest level of our being human. His narratives put us in a partnership *relation* and dialogical dialogue with text and characters which is

compassionate, sympathetic, caring and open. He evokes and inspires the best in us, even when presenting the more conflictual and violent aspects of ourselves and the world.

In his narratives, Malouf constantly crosses thresholds, bridges gaps, and reconciles opposites, intertwines the earthly grounding of the physical body and the high flight of the soul, giving them resonance and meaning, as a form of poetic, personal, political, cultural and social healing.

While reflecting on friendship and its poetic resonances, I also took some time to honour Stan Mellick, dearest professor, mentor and friend, and Ray(*mond*) Woods first guide of mine in the Australian bush, in my Australian first life, as a fragrant taste of true and loving sharing *mateship*. They are now abiding in that other realm of life, beyond the threshold, where they can see us and guide us in our dreams, in our sudden sideway visions, in their whispering breaths into our ears, telling always about love and beauty. Physical death and therefore *absence* of cherished and beloved family members and friends are certainly hard stepping stones we all must face, bridges we need to cross, abysses we need to go through. The pain of missing the body, the smile, the sound of beloved voices full of good advice and laughter, is tempered (only a little) by the loving memories, full of our good old times of togetherness, while discussing a book, or ritually watching *Star Wars* together (the first archetypal series, not the subsequent videogames) for the *umpteenth* time. The same is true of other friendships, temporarily lost on the surface of things, in the fragmentation of our mundane lives, sometimes smeared by hurtful empty gossip, *lost in translation* between the language of love and that of the judgemental and ungracious mind.

However, nothing, as Clem says, is ever lost, every sound and word and heartbeat is treasured in our precious Memory and Archives, ready to materialise again at the right time. David often underlines this very ethical concern in relationships, this attention to beauty, harmony, wellbeing. This is present, explicitly or in a more subtle way, in all his oeuvre, and, as he states in *The Happy Life* (2011) it has to do with the human perennial quest for happiness, in all its possible declinations. So it is intimacy, affective relationship, closeness, openness to the other which shapes language and gives depth and meaning, special colour and glow to our *word* and world.

David's word is always delicate and radiant: its pulse, beat, rhythm, and sound are in tune and attune you with the slow/fast active/meditative throb, pulsation, *heartbeat* of life, in its awesome magnificence and beauty … The poetical voice is always astounded by the beauty of life, intensely involved, interested, carefully observing and noting every *breath* (a recurring word and image), every tic, small gesture, mid-air pulsating movement, a fragment of eternity in the flux of time. It is easy to fine-tune to Malouf's imagination, not because of any special capacity of the reader, but thanks to the usual poise, grace, elegance, modesty and intensity of his work, thanks to *his* gift and facility to let you into his words, resounding and reverberating worlds.

Thus the roaring Ocean below David's flat, the welcoming place that hosts us with good food, jokes, music and talk, picks our every heartbeat. It takes form and echoes into the mind and heart, for a long time after the sound of the voice has softened into dreaming. A Silence Approaching Music.

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**Maria Bortoluzzi**

# Lifelong Learning

> Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention,
> through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful
> inquiry [people] pursue in the world,
> with the world, and with each other
> (Freire 1972: 46).

## 1. The School Welcome

The visitor arrived in the School[1] from far away with her load of theories and practices about learning, schooling, language learning and teaching. The journey had been long in time and space and culture. Expectations were high. Reality far exceeded them. The visitor, an experienced teacher and educator, soon realised that she was there to learn. While being treated with the respect due to her age and experience, the visiting teacher became a learner of life skills.

When the visitor arrived, in February 2024, Rajasthan (Northern India) was immersed in a mild winter with bright blue skies and pleasant temperatures. Trees and plants were blossoming everywhere enjoying the respite offered by the season before the scorching and unbearable heat the summer months would bring before the monsoons would set in. The School is in the countryside, just at the outskirts of the city. In the distance, the Aravalli ridge surrounds the plain. The Aravallis are geologically ancient mountains formed well before the Himalayas existed. Seen from Ajmer, they are a wooded rim in the distance, protecting the city, its lakes and the School. At the time the visitor arrived at the School, the countryside around it and the Aravallis in the distance were deep green, covered with the bounty of vegetation. Impossible to imagine that the countryside nearby can easily become a desert if not tended and cared for.

The visitor had seen the School eighteen years earlier: the changes made by the School organisers had transformed the place into an attractive campus. The School founders had wanted the School to be located in the countryside where they had planted, tended, watered, cherished gardens and orchards which surrounded the School buildings with the view on the Aravallis . The School was in a space of ancient and ever-regenerating beauty. Founded in 1996, it has always improved over the years: buildings for dorms and for meals for children and teachers were constructed, and so was the water harvesting reservoir, residences for the

[1] The School, located near Ajmer (Rajasthan, India), is called 'Bal Prakash' ('radiant children') and it is an Indian ONG (https://www.balprakash.in/). I am deeply grateful to the founders and organisers for the time I was invited to spend at Bal Prakash: Kusum Paliwal, visionary President of the Board of Trustees and Head of the School, and Sheela Upadhyay, generous Secretary of the Trust and longtime friend. Many thanks to the teachers and children who welcomed me.

teachers, the library decorated by the children, the computer room, the stable for the few cows. Around these buildings, the sandy, dusty soil has been lovingly taken care of: fruit trees and garden plants planted and tended, a playground built near the school, a vegetable garden nearby, artistic benches created by an artist, Tutul Anindita Bhattacharya, for the School, a pond with lotuses and water lilies, a home-made pool for the children to jump into the water when summer temperature soars, a nursery for young plants, a vermicompost lot. The School has to be comfortable, welcoming, peaceful and beautiful. Among the basic needs, along with a safe place to sleep, eat healthy food, find books and education, the School has included from the very start the beauty of the surroundings, the healing power of plants and greenery, blossoming flowers and birds feeding on the fruit trees. Bougainvillea are flashes of colours here and there like beacon fires. The place embodies what Freire calls 'life-affirming humanization' (Freire 1972: 43).

The School, virtually open to the countryside, has special wardens who do not allow strangers on the grounds: stray dogs have formed a pack headed by an experienced and wise female dog, her coat golden, like a queen. The dogs feel the School is home and behave accordingly: they are fed by the teachers and the children, and the children play with them. The dogs keep watch in exchange. The visitor was not perceived as enemy by the dogs; if anything, they wanted her to play with them. They felt the favourable attitude of the other humans towards the visitor, and accepted the stranger as a welcome guest even though she was not playful enough for the young dogs, used to the children's energetic running around.

In India education is compulsory from 6 to 14 years of age and state schools are open and free to all children until the compulsory school-leaving certificate is attained. And so, who is this School for? The School is there for those children who would not attend school otherwise: to go to school every day children need to have a family or a carer who takes them there; in some situations the adults are in no position to do it or the state school is too far away from the village home; in other cases children are in charge of younger siblings and they have to stay home. The School welcomes these boys and girls, from 3 to 18 (so beneath and beyond compulsory school age), and offers them boarding and lessons for free. The founders and organisers want the School to be a safe haven for difficult lives and a beautiful welcoming place to forget sorrows, heal wounds, restore smiles and learn to be self-reliant, become self-confident, help others, experience respect and self-respect. The members of the board of Trustees are volunteers and self-funded; the local (and distant) community has formed a network to help the School in practical ways endorsing its principles and values, and pay teachers and maintenance.

In the 28 years of its life (from 1996 to 2024, the time of writing), the School has seen many generations of children arrive, thrive, play, learn, grow up and then go and live their own life. Not all remain in the School as long as they should or could. Some families or carers move far away and take the children with them, others marry the girls off at a young age, some adolescents are reclaimed back home to look after newborns or younger siblings, others have to go to work. The School organisers try to persuade families to leave the children as long as possible in a learning environment, but the last word is not for the School to be pronounced.

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction,
by reconciling the poles of the contradiction
so that both are simultaneously teachers and students
(Freire 1972: 46).

**2. Skills for Life**

The children (so they appeared to the visitor even though some were adolescents) were playing in the playground when the visitor arrived on Sunday and the late afternoon sun added a golden glow to the countryside. The playground was full of laughter, races, chatting and playing. The following days, it was the weekly routine that struck the visitor, the supportive atmosphere that existed in the School, the autonomy of the children, their ability to rely on one another, and their skills to interact with a complete stranger who did not speak any of the languages currently spoken in the School (Hindi and Rajasthani among others).

The visitor saw that the routine was quietly steered by the teachers and autonomously carried out by the children who were given responsibility to contribute to the School day and its smooth progress from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night: helping with meals and cleaning up, ringing the School bell, participating in classes, working on their own, in groups or pairs, practising crafts, etc. The teachers were quietly supervising, suggesting, helping, supporting. Voices were calm, classes took place with no fuss. Elder

children took care of younger ones, some young ones helped smaller kids as young as 3, 4 or 5 years of age.

Everybody seemed to know well where he or she was supposed to be, at what time, who they should be helping, who should help them, or, in one case, just observe the others learn, unable to do more than that while his classmates included him, smiling, accepting in the activity a boy who was not really contributing to it. He was content to be present, part of the community with his silent, admired observation of his classmates.

The teachers were patient, calm, smiling, firm. They were supported by children who already had the ability to help their classmates. Lessons took place in class groups, smaller groups, pairs, individually. Class groups (young, intermediate and advanced) meant for the teachers working with children of different ages together. Heterogeneous abilities were included in each group: learning and teaching were adapted to the individual student as part of the learning community who would support him/her, starting from his/her ability, competences, knowledge, emotional skills. The visitor realised that up till then she had never seen before such an activation of inclusive practices on the part of the teachers but also on the part of the students who seemed to absorb the teachers' openness and flexibility in this variety of ages, learning experiences, competences, knowledge, motivation. The students behaved as if they knew the teaching principles they were abiding to: respect for diversity, inclusion, peer-learning, autonomy, care and respect for less autonomous children.

The visitor was immediately included in this environment and taken care of. The children, in particular two adolescent students, F. and G., took charge of the visiting teacher. Their communicative abilities were remarkable. English as an Additional Language was the bridge, a bit uncertain, but supported by a great desire to make themselves understood by the guest. Motivation was the magic wand for all children: they wanted to communicate with the visitor, they were curious of her different background. She was a sort of a portal to a faraway world they had never seen, but they imagined attractive in diversity.

The children were rightly proud of their School, everything in it: their classrooms, the beautiful library they had decorated themselves with the help of an artist, the grounds full of flowers and plants, even the playful dogs. The visitor was shown round, helped to understand where to go for classes, accompanied to places, often surrounded by children who looked at her and wanted attention, eye contact, the reaction of a smile: Was the visitor paying attention? Did she manage to see the School through their eyes? Their eyes asked silently: "Isn't this the most beautiful School you've seen, Madam?"

The role had reversed, like the cartwheels performed by one girl, not to show off, but because her friends wanted to demonstrate to the visitor how good she is in gymnastics, how remarkable and special. Proud of her. And while the visitor was wondering what was the best course to reach out to them, they did. The teacher did not have to explain, elicit answers or ask questions, but she was included, surrounded by eager children who wanted to ask her questions and talk. Communicative magic was collectively performed by the children. Later, the visitor called it 'the language pooling strategy'. Only some of the children could speak some English (EAL), some had snippets of it, some were too small to have experienced it yet. They did not give up. They looked at one another, decided what question to ask the visitor and they put the utterance together, contributing collectively with

what they knew; then one of them (usually an older student) would be the spokesperson for the group, more or less confident of their English skills, but definitely proud of what they had collectively come up with. It was crowdsourcing language interaction on the spot, off the cuff. The visitor was amazed. The strategy worked also for checking that everybody got what the visitor said: some children would translate into languages unknown to the visitor, check meaning, back and fro among themselves. They did not want to miss the opportunity to understand or be understood.

Communicative strategies were deployed verbally and multimodally: gestures, facial expressions, gaze, movement were making meaning together with English and sometimes without. Determination in getting the meaning across is usually successful. As are motivation, involvement, relevance of the interaction for the participants. Yes, they all wanted to interact successfully and they all tried their best, accepting uncertainties and vagueness, relying on their friends. The visitor was asked what countries she had visited, what games she likes playing, whether she can jump. Jump? The visitor thought it better, lest she should risk giving a demonstration, and admitted that no, she is not able to jump.

And so the children as a group took the lead. They wanted their friend to demonstrate how easily and effortlessly she could do cartwheels and the crab. She was shy at first, but everybody encouraged her, she complied and everybody applauded.

And the countries visited by the teacher, did they include Norway? No, the visitor said, never been to Norway. The children explained that they had had a young teacher from Norway last year and groups of visitors from a Norwegian school in the past. The visitor admitted that they certainly knew more about Norway than herself.

The visitor was asked what languages she can speak. When the children heard that Italian is her native language, they wanted to learn Italian. The strange unfamiliar sounds of that language did not seem to be a problem for them: they easily picked up expressions, repeating them smoothly, perfect sounding. Yes, the visitor thought to herself, it is the miracle of bilingual, trilingual children who juggle between languages and language varieties, who often arrive in school speaking languages different from the obligatory medium of instruction (Hindi) and learn to speak, understand, read and write in a language different from their own. Many of them belong to the third of the world children who have to bridge that gap between their own language(s) and the language of education, experiencing an arduous school start (Romaine 2013). However, having to use different languages makes them fast at picking up expressions in an exotic language like Italian. Complex sounds do not discourage them. 'Buongiorno', 'Arrivederci', they repeat in their young voices, like those of Italian kids their age, perfectly pronounced. They know the visitor is surprised at their skill and smile broadly enjoying the moment.

Reading time in the afternoon is free for everybody who wants to join in; otherwise, they can do other activities: studying, playing, sewing, drawing, gardening, etc. The children get the key and open the door of the library building, welcome the visitor in, put mats on the floor; then each child chooses a book to read. Free reading time, independent time to enjoy having a book in your hands, opening it, looking at the images, reading or not reading the written text, putting it back, taking another, reading the same book together with another child. They can go back to class for afternoon activities when they want, taking responsibility for how they use some of their time. A teacher is present, proud of the children's autonomy during library reading time. The Head of the School wanted this free time with books for children who do not have any at home and in some cases cannot read and write before coming to the School.

One of the children, attentive, caring, witty, realised that the visitor had not chosen a book for herself and she thought that she may need help selecting one. The girl took from the shelves a beautifully illustrated book about the animals of the world and put it on the teacher's desk. The volume was in English and probably one of the most precious possessions of the library.

They notice things these children, they know how to make people feel welcome, included. They know when people need help and what they might like. Maybe because this is what is done by the teachers in the School to make them feel at home and cherished. In the School you receive support from the community and then you give help back, when you can: most relevant among life-skills. On its website[2], the School states its educational principles:

> It aims for holistic development where children not only reach their academic goals but also develop professional and inter-personal skills. Children take part in farming

[2] Bal Prakash, https://www.balprakash.in/ (consulted on 30/05/2024).

and plantation activities on a routine basis. They are also trained for other skills like carpentry, stitching, cooking, music and sports.

Learning for life. Life that will soon be outside the School.

> Life and its vitality in nature and society is based on cycles of renewal and regeneration of mutuality, respect and human solidarity. The relationship between soil and society is a relationship based on reciprocity, on the Law of Return, of giving back (Shiva 2015: 5).

**3. School in Nature**

The founders of the School wanted it to become an oasis of beauty and freshness in a desert climate. The School was planned and built in the countryside to be surrounded by what would become in time orchards, gardens, vegetable garden, a pond for lotuses and water lilies; these can be seen from all the windows and doors of the School. They give the children the opportunity to re-balance their complicated and disrupted lives when they play in the garden and take care of it when this is needed, watering the plants with water harvested in the tank, taking care of the orchard and gathering fruit when ripe. Wilson calls "biophilia" (1984) the human need to seek a connection with natural surroundings thus enacting love for life. This is one of the tenets of the School clearly set on their homepage:

> **Connect with Nature**
> There is a special emphasis to be connected with nature. With its sprawling campus and vegetation house. Children stay connected with the mother earth and green ecosystem.

The children learn to take care of living beings: plants and animals, their mates, the teachers, guests, the visitor. Their life outside the School will not be easy, and their ability to see themselves as part of an ecocultural community will help them find their own place in society and be self-confident and resilient.

The teachers and educators in the School teach the children how to become active agents of change and preserve the fresh greenery of garden and orchard in the searing heat of summer. The desertic area where the School is built, originally covered with sparse bushes, is now garden, orchard, vegetable garden, pond, vermicompost plot; life thrives in its exaggerated, imaginative ways.

Ecoliteracy[3] is lived everyday in the School by teachers and children. Riane Eisler would approve: "Since partnership education offers a systemic approach, environmental education is not an add-on but an integral part of the curriculum" (Eisler 2000: xvii).

Children are clearly proud of their surroundings and show the visitor around. They

[3] "[W]e posit emotional, social, and ecological intelligence as essential dimensions of our universal human intelligence that simply expand outward in their focus: from self, to others, to all living systems" (Goleman, Bennett & Barlow 2012: 26).

know they contribute creating and preserving all that. The result is bountiful, rimmed by the green Aravallis in the distance, like an embrace while the breeze plays the wind-chime.

> L'opera d'arte, infatti, a torto o a ragione, infonde in noi una sensazione di pienezza, di compimento di perfezione, esattamente ciò che vogliamo dalla nostra vita[4] (Todorov 2010: 13).

**4. Beauty for Life**

The visitor feels she is in a School that instantiates what Eisler calls the partnership model of education:

> I call this approach partnership education. It is an education to help children not only better navigate through our difficult times but also create a future orienting more to what in my study of cultural evolution I have identified as a partnership rather than a dominator model. […] '[T]hey describe systems of belief and social structure that either nurture and support – or inhibit and undermine – equitable, democratic, nonviolent, caring relations' (Eisler 2000: xiv).

[4] Indeed, the work of art, rightly or wrongly, infuses in us a feeling of fullness, completeness, perfection: precisely what we want from our life (my translation).

Care is material, emotional and mental (Eisler 2000: 8) and the School is a community of learning for living well and in harmony with oneself, the society and the ecosystems. Arts and crafts have the power of giving agency to the children by involving them in the beauty of creating or contributing collectively to making beautiful objects for communal use.

Their library building and the mentors' residence have become walls of flowers imagined and decorated by the children under the supervision of Tutul Anindita Bhattacharya, the artist who donated her time, knowledge and care to inspire the children and involve them into re-inventing blank whitewashed external walls into a meadow in full blossom where every child had the freedom to imagine her/his flower for everybody to see. The library and the mentors' residence are now unique buildings which the children have contributed to rendering special, original, colourful. Their diverse imagination and skills make these buildings precious to them, to other future students, to their teachers, to guests. 'Who painted these building?' asks the visitor. 'We did!', reply the children, and each one of them shows the flower they painted to make the wall blossom. These blossoms created by the imagination and the hands of the children blend with the plants of the garden in a continuity of beauty.

Here and there, tiled benches wait for children and teachers to sit in the shade to chat, play, learn, discuss. The benches are unique, designed by the artist together with the children for the School. Painted paper models became ceramic tiles to cover concrete benches and creating colourful imaginary worlds as welcoming points for sitting, chatting and working.

Woodwork, carpentry, sewing, gardening and other crafts help the children explore a world of skills, beauty and also potential jobs for when they will leave the School.

Beyond the practical side of it, the visitor sees how the children partake in the beautiful surroundings which they also contribute to maintaining and improving. Children's life deserves imagination and involvement.

**5. Resilience for Life**

Not everything is smooth and straightforward in the School. A community is never without problems. Children arrive at the School with complicated or even sorrowful, traumatic experiences in their mind and body. Sometimes there is no family to go back to, sometimes the family is there but the children do not want to go back to it during the holidays. Some went through experiences of child labour, exploitation, abuse. Words are not enough for the variety of psychological and physical scars. Yet, the visitor finds a calm, relaxing and vibrant atmosphere. No shouting, no scolding. The teachers and educators are gentle, patient, smiling. They keep a watchful eye on the children: it is easy for everybody to repeat negative behaviours they have seen or experienced themselves; it is easy to re-enact the 'victim vs bully' scenario. The teachers entrust the younger children to their older peers, but observe and check that no-one is exploited or ill-treated.

Obsolete habits at times take over and girls cannot complete their school years because the family reclaims them. The organisers and teachers know that they will be married off at a young age, they try to persuade the family to leave the children in the School at least till school-leaving age; but the family has the last word in the matter, and the child leaves not to come back again.

The visitor also knows that some children had to be dismissed because they were misbehaving, and this was affecting other children. The organisers and educators perceive this dismissal as a defeat of the educational system and a loss for the whole School.

Other stories are successful. Students who arrive as adolescents in the School find it difficult to adapt to its routine, but after a few weeks they become part of the community and want to stay on. Children and adolescents are accepted with whatever level of schooling (or lack of it) and they learn to live in the School, respect its rules and routines, the teachers and the other children. They find their own self-respect, inner resilience and strength. Some are fast learners and able to help others in a powerful peer-learning peer-teaching virtuous circle whereby the mentor child learns life skills together with her/his tutees. Caring mentoring and learning become emotional ties of friendship and mutual support to improve and do well together.

> In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from 'another world' […] do not come to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world (Freire 1972: 147).

**6. Homecoming**

The visitor's time in the School is over. It is time for her to go home. She says goodbye to the teachers, the children, the head. 'Arrivederci' say the children. How can they remember that difficult word so easily? The visitor is touched. A drop of Italian in the land of the Aravallis,

cherished by smiling eyes and mouths. Quick young minds eager to live, to learn, to travel with the visitor if only through words transformed into keepsakes. Words as talismans for change, knowledge to explore the world. If she wants to go home, the visitor thinks, maybe she should remain.

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**Maria Paola Guarducci, Francesca Terrenato**

# South African Past Voices and Herstories: Performances as Counter-Texts*

**Abstract I:** Questo articolo esplora le intersezioni creative di etnia e genere negli spazi multimediali sudafricani che partecipano alla costruzione delle narrazioni storiche nazionali. A chi appartiene il passato registrato e come è conservato/rappresentato nell'archivio culturale del Paese? L'articolo si concentra sulle figure storiche femminili dimenticate, manipolate o marginalizzate nella storiografia ufficiale considerandole luoghi privilegiati della riscrittura storica femminile sudafricana. Questo approccio poggia sui recenti studi che invitano la ricerca ad adottare "alternative methodologies that take seriously the realm of the speculative and the imaginative" (Soudien 2023: 83).

**Abstract II:** This paper investigates creative intersections of race and gender in South African multimedia spaces in the construction of the country's historical narrative(s). Whose past is recorded and how is it preserved/represented in the national cultural archive? The article focuses on historical female figures forgotten, manipulated or marginalized in the official records, as a privileged site of South African female historical counter-narratives. This approach relies on recent studies that invite scholars to adopt "alternative methodologies that take seriously the realm of the speculative and the imaginative" (Soudien 2023: 83).

**Keywords:** Krotoa, Sarah Baartman, postcolonial archive, South African poetry, post-apartheid.

## 1. (De)constructing the Mother-of-the-Nation Myth: Krotoa and Sarah Baartman

After the end of apartheid, a number of cultural icons have emerged that identify the country with its colonial and more recent past history of sufferings and with its new multiculturalism. Nelson Mandela, the Springbok national rugby team, Table Mountain, Miriam Makeba, Ubuntu, Robben Island, Krotoa/Eva, and Sarah Baartman are among the symbols that come to mind when thinking of South Africa today. For most of them, post-apartheid implied

* This article is the result on an ongoing collaborative project by the two authors. Paragraphs 1 is jointly authored; paragraph 2 is authored by Terrenato and paragraph 3 by Guarducci; paragraph 4 was written by Guarducci with the exception of the section going from "In a compelling performance […]" to "(Phillips 2020: 21)" which was written by Terrenato.

a significant shift of meaning, sometimes expanding previous equivalences sometimes overturning them completely[1].

Whereas the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* pushed South Africa into a potentially never-ending process of historical rewritings and opened up the doors to individual truths, the (re)construction of the nation through memory after the end of apartheid, according to Meg Samuelson (2007), largely plays on the "dismembered" bodies of women. The best known and most significant example of this subjugation of a female body to national interests, in both a metaphorical and literal sense, is Sarah Baartman's dissected body. In the New South Africa's culture of 're-memorisation' of historical maternal figures of reference, Samuelson sees a continuation of the colonial abuse of women's bodies. In this process, she claims, the more irregular aspects of this female heritage are erased (Samuelson 2007: 2). These aspects resurface in how more or lesser-known female figures are imagined in the arts, thereby problematising the very relationship between South Africa, its history, its way of remembering and archiving.

Many are the questions to be asked, among which whose past is recorded and how is it preserved/represented in the national cultural archive? How do South African artists, often engaging with pre-colonial and colonial history, relate to the idea of a post-colonial archive? More specifically, how is this ideal archive embedded in the work of South African women poets? One of the strategies of 're-membering' is to give (lyrical) voice to historical female figures from a remote past: Krotoa/Eva and Sarah Baartman are but the most significant examples. In their cases information scattered in the official records is restored, amplified and positioned at the heart of the grand historical narrative of the New South Africa. Next to them, there is a number of unfathomed, anonymous female ancestors (native and/or enslaved) who ask for being included in an alternative archive by virtue of their presence/appearance in poetry[2].

If 'restorative' memory aims at filling the gaps of recorded and archived history, it must go beyond the boundaries of facts and venture into the sphere of fictions:

> For over a decade now, in the academy, in memory institutions, school classrooms, courtrooms, the media, people's living rooms, and, crucially, the TRC, South Africans have been searching for meanings in a myriad narratives of the past. For some, the meanings are borne by "facts;" the "truth" of what happened. For others "fact" and "fiction," "history" and "story," coalesce in imaginative space (Harris 2002: 82).

Archival sources do not offer much material about Krotoa and Sarah Baartman, who

[1] For example: Mandela as a terrorist vs Mandela as a hero; Table Mountain as a natural spot vs Table Mountain as a cultural site hosting the first autochthonous presences; Krotoa/Eva as an unfit mother vs Krotoa/Eva as the mother of the nation, Robben Island as a secluded prison vs Robben Island as a tourist attraction, the Springbok rugby team as an expression of white Afrikaners only vs the same team, now led by its first black captain, Siya Kolisi, as the recipient of national pride and collective reverence.

[2] What is activated in these poetic texts is what Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka in their *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* refer to as the "mode of actuality" of cultural memory, that is, the process through which the context of the present acts on the archive (Assmann & Czaplika 1995: 130).

have, since the mid-Nineties, been adopted as 'mothers' of the Rainbow nation. In their role of natives who came in close contact with the colonisers and suffered injustice, their restitution to the national archive may appear as a well-intended – though highly speculative – operation. As we will see, the results are, to say the least, rather controversial.

As a starting point in our inquiry on cases in which female identities are performed in poetry and/or multimedia texts in order to construct or deconstruct South African narratives of the country's past, we turn to recent works that share the ambition of reforming Krotoa and Sarah Baartman's place in the archive. The 'performances' we take here into account are such at a literal and/or metaphorical level: we rely on filmic texts, visual arts and the written and performed works of women poets. We share here the broad understanding of 'performativity' as action in the cultural arena, especially with regard to gender issues, which characterizes some seminal theoretic works in the field (Samuelson 2007: 7). When dealing with South Africa and its politics of national belonging, as a matter of fact, ethnicity always plays a part. Some recent poems by women authors, striving to problematise the heritage of these 'mothers of the nation' in terms of belonging and non-belonging will then allow for a nuanced and positioned[3] reading of what we know and can infer about their lives.

**2. Krotoa**

In 1674, Krotoa (also known as Eva van Meerhoff)[4] died on Robben Island where she was imprisoned on orders by the Dutch governor of the Cape. She had been accused of shameful sexual conduct and alcoholism by the same colonizers who had depended on her for their survival during the first years of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) settlement at the foot of Table Mountain. She had acted as an interpreter and counsellor for the Dutch, allowing them to trade and close treaties with the inhabitants of the coast[5].

In post-apartheid South Africa she was seen as the ideal ancestral mother: a woman not only able to translate languages and cultures, but who also hosted in her womb the first ethnically mixed offspring. Samuelson described the ongoing process in which "Krotoa-Eva the translator is transformed in Krotoa-Eva the rainbow Mother, particularly by those white South Africans eager to claim belonging in the new nation" (Samuelson 2007: 4). This cultural appropriation trend, supported by speculative genetic inquiries (her offspring, according to DNA research, is also white), is still visible today. Among efforts by different communities to appropriate her exclusively, the nation has publicly acknowledged her symbolic meaning:

[3] By "positioned" in this context we also mean the cultural and ethnical affiliation of the poets – black and coloured – *vis-à-vis* their subject matter.

[4] What her native name actually was is impossible to reconstruct. The Dutch possibly wrote as 'Krotoa' the word meaning "kid in custody" in the language used by her uncle's people she was living with, and who entrusted her to the Dutch governor Jan van Riebeeck and Maria de la Queillerie, his wife, when she was ten or eleven years old; it was her custodians' decision to rename her Eva. She took the family name Van Meerhoff from the Danish surgeon in service in the fort, whom she married in 1664, after having given birth to at least two babies in her teens. For references on Krotoa's life, see Landman (1996) and Wells (1998).

[5] Krotoa was reportedly a member of the native group of the Goringhaikonas, also known as 'beach-combers'. In the early 1700s the group was either extinct or assimilated under pressure of the VOC.

a monument in her honour accompanied the celebrations for the 350 years of existence of the Castle of Good Hope in 2016. On that occasion the 'Khoi leaders', the representatives of a movement trying to restore the cultural memory of the earliest inhabitants of the Cape region, sternly protested against the government's appropriation of her name and heritage[6].

Also the South African film industry took an interest in her and in 2016 the release of the film *Krotoa* caused a similar stir[7]. Starting from the closing titles, a usually neutral aspect in a movie, an evident ideological stance is conveyed in this biopic. The last caption reads: "Krotoa has White, Black and Mixed Race descendants including many famous South Africans such as iconic political leaders Paul Kruger, Jan Smuts and F. W. De Klerk". The identification of this white nationalist triumvirate[8] as Krotoa's descendants elicits quite a few questions, as do the film and its script. The focus lies here on how Krotoa, the native, first a girl then a woman, interacted with white men, and in particular with Jan van Riebeeck, the commander of the Dutch VOC settlement on the Cape from its inception to 1662. The movie creates a flattering depiction of Jan van Riebeeck: a young, handsome man trapped in his institutional role and in an unhappy marriage, on whom the clever and sensual Krotoa exerts a fatal attraction, to the point that he 'cannot help but' rape her one night, to be then devastated by his sense of guilt. Needless to say, the official records of the VOC bear no indication that Van Riebeeck was sentimentally or sexually involved with Krotoa[9], although, from what is known at large about colonial contexts, it seems likely that he might have exerted his right as a master in requiring sexual services on her part.

The topic of language in the script also deserves some notice. Krotoa's proficiency as an interpreter, and as an early speaker of Dutch as a second language, is fully recorded in Van Riebeeck's journal[10]. However, most dialogues are in Afrikaans, a language that did not exist at that time. Khoekhoegowab (also known as Khoekhoe or Nama), a non-Bantu language supposedly close to the one spoken by native tribes in the Cape coastal region, is used in the dialogues between native characters such as Krotoa herself, her uncle Authsumato, and her native boyfriend Doman[11]. Without diving deeper into the history and development of Afrikaans, in which the Dutch substratum underwent a gradual process of creolization

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[6] See the reportage at https://www.news24.com/life/new-krotoa-film-reveals-life-of-that-khoi-woman20170806 (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[7] A Penguin Films production, directed by Roberta Durrant, starring Crystal Donna Roberts as Krotoa and Armand Aucamp as Van Riebeeck. The script also sees the collaboration of Kaye Ann Williams who directed the documentary on Krotoa for the *Hidden Histories* series (2013).

[8] Paul Kruger (1825-1904), a hero of the Boer resistance against the Brits and President of the Transvaal Republic; Jan Smuts (1870-1950) President of the South African Union and revered member of the United Nations; President De Klerk, the pragmatic politician who envisioned and made possible the democratic transition of the country (Mlambo & Parsons 2018: 75, 127 and ff, 228 and ff).

[9] By official records of the VOC we refer here to Van Riebeeck's diary (1952-1957).

[10] Van Riebeeck's diary has been consulted in the original language (Dutch) in a standard modern edition. The places in which Eva (Krotoa) is mentioned are too many to be listed in this article (Van Riebeeck 1952-1957).

[11] The relationship among these characters in the film, and especially the Krotoa/Doman subplot, is unaccounted for in the extant historical sources, and has to be considered almost totally fictitious.

with local and other European languages[12], the film promotes the idea that Krotoa is also the mother of Afrikaans, that is to say, of its white, historically dominant, variety. In the polarised terms that are always at play in South African debates on belonging and identity, the film might be accused of some kind of 'blackwashing' as well as of a 'whitewashing' of South African history. The pivot in this double process is Krotoa, whose fictionalised historical role grants more credibility to the white establishment and culture by giving it a 'native' hue, while at the same time toning down the clash between the white colonisers and the native peoples. Krotoa and Van Riebeeck stand together, in the filmic text, as a monument to goodwill and cooperation between ethnic groups.

Appreciative critics underline the emancipatory message conveyed by a movie that "explores the life of the only recorded female interpreter of her time; which is not only depicted by a female lead, but was also written, directed, produced and edited by women"[13]. At the other end of the spectrum, the film is accused of chauvinism for glorifying Van Riebeeck and declassifying his sexual assault by showing an almost consensual Krotoa (Van Niekerk 2017). A more balanced view is put forward by Barnabas and Jansen van Vuuren: the film itself "vacillates between myth and (fractured) memory" but its viewers "are left with a hope trope, offering a neat ending to a messy tale". Their conclusion is that the "promulgation of womb over words is symbolic of the inequality evident in the representation of women's participation in history, thus turning a poignant film into a weak nation-building exercise" (Barnabas & Jansen van Vuuren 2020: 41). They convincingly put forward a connection with how mainstream culture, and once again cinema, fictionalises Sarah Baartman, contended between dominant narratives and positioned re-appropriations (Barnabas & Jansen van Vuuren 2020: 41).

A different operation is at work in poems, videopoems, etc. which try to restore the complexity of Krotoa's role. Her story becomes then emblematic of abuse, resistance, inequality, gender oppression but also of resilience, inventiveness and female agency. In both Karen Press's *Krotoa's Story* (1990) and in Toni Stuart's performed recreation of this character titled *Krotoa/Eva's Suite: a cape jazz poem in three movements* (2018) Krotoa embraces and plays with her ambiguity as a creature forced by circumstances to juggle on a border between two opposing worlds[14].

On another public occasion in 2021, Stellenbosch University officially announced the renaming of a building in its premises after Krotoa. This time, the Khoi leaders were invited and took part in the ceremony by performing a ritual, among scholars, academics and students. On the occasion, poet and activist Khadija (Tracey) Heeger performed her poem *Krotoa or the child of the mother (for Krotoa Eva)*[15]. No video or audio recording is preserved, but the poem was published in her Afrikaans/English collection *Thicker Than*

[12] See, among others, the writings of Hans den Besten, (Den Besten & Van der Wouden 2012).

[13] See the anonymous review at http://www.waafrikaonline.com/2017/08/krotoa-fictional-story-inspired-by-real.html (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[14] For a discussion on these two works see Guarducci & Terrenato (2022: 29-42).

[15] *The Krotoa Building*, https://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/visual-redress/initiatives/krotoa (consulted on 10/07/2024).

*Sorrow* (Heeger 2022: 20-22)[16]. The repeated invocation of Krotoa's name seems to take us into the realm of the revival process leading to the construction of a symbolic mother for all South Africans, but the second line of the following quote, as the poem in general, casts a shadow upon the possibility to connect present identities to buried memories impossible to revive: "O vertel die storie Groot Moeder / van die memories waar o's nooit wassie" [*"Oh tell the story, Big Mother / of those memories in which we never were"*] (Heeger 2022: 21). By playing with words denoting the acts of telling, speaking foreign languages, and adapting to the environment, Heeger's poem transfers elements from the dominant narrative about Krotoa, or rather of 'Eva the tolk', who was able to function both in the Dutch fort and in a Khoi village, into the present-day revival. This revival is marked by disguisement and feelings of exclusiveness: "Ons rolspeel hier in tale wat leuens vertel oor ons komvandaan saad" [*"We play roles here in languages that lie about the seed of our origin"*], is said in a verse (Heeger 2022: 20).

In this shared and contested Krotoa narrative, the poem argues, today's generally twisted relationship to history is manifest. This becomes evident as the poem introduces the issue of the Battle of Blood River, one of the tenets of Afrikaner pride (a few hundred Boers defeated a large Zulu army there in 1838), remembered during apartheid with a monument in honour of the Boer fighters. The government has now added another monument, right in front of the first one, glorifying Zulu warriors' heroism[17]. The poem bitterly ironises the concept of ethnic loyalties thereby connecting the Krotoa debate to the trend by which competing groups strive for a native ancestry:

> [...]
> nou hakel ons in bloed die rym van vals identiteit in popular geskiedenis
> skielik staan ons almal hier by die bloed rivier
> eis ons die bloedband met beduiwelde tonge
> aasvoël se belange oppie hart
> "Wie is meer Khoi as wie!" [...]
>
> *[...]*
> *now we comb in blood the rhyme of a false identity in popular history*
> *suddenly we all stand there at the blood river*
> *we reclaim that blood tie with a ruined tongue*
> *the interest of vultures in our hearts*
> *"Who is more Khoi than the other?" [...]*
> (Heeger 2022: 21).

[16] The poetic production of this author reaches the public mainly through live performance; the only other published collection, *Beyond the Delivery Room*, dates from 2013. *Krotoa* is an Afrikaans poem, with a strong Afrikaaps influence, and a four-line section in English. All translations from Afrikaans in this article are made for the occasion by Francesca Terrenato. The English versions are in italics.

[17] See *Blood River Monuments in South Africa* at https://contestedhistories.org/resources/case-studies/ncome-and-blood-river-monuments-on-ncombe-river-in-nquthu-dundee/ (consulted on 10/07/2024).

### 3. Sarah Baartman

Sarah Baartman's story travelled around the world inspiring works of art and provoking debates everywhere. The idea that a young woman who already suffered the loss of her family was forced to move from her natal Eastern Cape to Cape Town as a servant and, possibly, a prostitute; the idea that such a woman could end up performing as "The Hottentot Venus" in 1810s freak shows in London and later in Parisian libertine salons; the thought that, on top of everything, once dead in 1816 of some obscure disease for which she received no treatment, Sarah had been dissected by the scientist George Cuvier and her genitalia and brain exposed in glass jars at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, together with her wax body cast, until 1974 have all come to shock past and contemporary sensibilities[18].

In the mid-Nineties, Baartman became both a new 'mother' of the nation and a figure whose story elicited a reflection upon the perception of Black women's bodies worldwide[19]. The procedure for returning her mortal remains from France started in 1994 at the initiative of the Griquas National Council[20], which petitioned President Nelson Mandela for their 'ancestor' to be brought home. Mandela became the principal sponsor of the operation: the living Rainbow icon working to shape a new Rainbow icon. It was only in 2002 that the French parliament authorised the expatriation of Sarah's remains and her body cast. She was then buried in her supposed birthplace, the Gamtoos River Valley, in a broadcasted traditional Khoi ceremony attended by President Thabo Mbeki. The grave was declared a national heritage site in 2007 and, after a series of arguments connected to Sarah's history of exploitation during her lifetime and the consequent inappropriateness of charging a fee to visit the site, was granted free access[21].

The ways in which Baartman was and is celebrated/recreated, that is, 'performed' are never, and to a certain extent, could never be, neutral. In 2000, for example, the University of Cape Town acquired and exposed a sculpture of her made by Willie Bester by assembling scrap metal material. In 2016, in the context of the *#RhodesMustFall* university protests, a group of black students, mainly women, dressed the sculpture with pieces of cloth to express their intolerance in the face of yet another display of Sarah's naked body, albeit in this 'translated' form. The remonstration resulted in a more structured exhibition held in 2018 in another venue of the same university, where the sculpture was given a context.

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[18] Among the many references on Sarah Baartman's life, for the purpose of this article we refer to Holmes (2007).

[19] The photography and art exhibition *Black Venus: Reclaiming Black Women in Visual Culture* (New York 2022 and London 2023), curated by Nigerian-British Aindrea Emelife, is but the most recent example of a never-ending process of dissemination. Among popular international appropriations of Baartman, we can also include Suzan-Lori Parks's production of 1996, *Venus*, where the woman is given full agency over her choices. Parks's goal of removing black women from the stereotype of eternal victims is understandable but historically untenable, as Jean Young has proved discussing the play and the different reactions it produced in the US (Young 1997).

[20] The Griqua claim their descent from the now extinct aboriginal Khoi and San. Sarah belonged to a small Eastern Cape ethnically mixed Khoisan-Xhosa clan which, it seems, did not make it into the Twentieth century (Holmes 2007: 9-20).

[21] See: https://www.sawarmemorials.ed.ac.uk/sarah-baartman-memorial-hankey-eastern-cape/ (consulted on 10/07/2024).

Other works of art, including life-size photographs of the 'clad' statue, surrounded it; all the supporting, emotional, apologetic paper cards placed on it during the protest were also on display. The staging was accompanied by the looping soundtrack of the famous poem *I've Come to Take You Home* (2011)[22], read by its author Diana Ferrus, and by the opening live performance of *resurrection* (2017)[23] by Koleka Putuma. The combination transformed the event into an interactive, multimedia happening open to dialogue, which created both empathy and constructive debates from the complexity of its topic[24].

In this regard, for example, one regrets to note that the widely acclaimed movie, *Vénus noire* (2010), by Tunisian-French director Adbellatif Kechiche, while trying to objectively expose the wrongs suffered by Sarah in London and Paris, actually replicates the morbid gaze of racist nineteenth-century Europe and deletes any subjectivity and agency that Sarah, albeit in appalling circumstances, must have had. The movie reiterates obsessively and in an almost pornographic fashion Sarah as an object of racist and gender-based violence, to which she reacts either by visibly suffering or with resigned indifference. In a possible act of respect, Kechiche chooses not to venture inside the main character's individuality, but the movie duplicates the perversity of the narration we inherited, by insisting with the camera on Sarah's supposedly 'abnormal' body[25]. Rather than correcting the many stereotypes affecting Sarah's story, the film simplifies it along the Manichean binarisms of colonisers/colonised, white/black, men/women, culture/nature, master/slave, rich/poor, etc. *Vénus noire* toured in international festivals and was predictably awarded the Equal Opportunity Award at the 67th Venice International Film Festival. In spite of its success, though, a significant part of its audience and reviewers did not welcome the way Kechiche indulges on Sarah's physical and psychological subjugation. Sarah is almost always shot silent and although different sources report she was multilingual, the few times she speaks she stammers or does not expand any further than "yes" or "no". Also, the character of her first 'master', Hendrick Cesars, whom we know was a free black, is portrayed unproblematically as a 'Boer'. The film thus erases the complexities of different forms of discrimination faced by Baartman and Cesars in England, a country that had just abolished slavery and opened a crusade against the Boers[26].

The clear-cut dichotomy on which Kechiche's movie is built is not historically accurate

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[22] Composed in 1998, the poem had a role in the process that led to Sarah's return to her home country (see Guarducci & Terrenato 2022: 106-108).

[23] *Resurrection* features in "Postmemory", the third and last section of Putuma's bestselling collection *Collective Amnesia* (2020; I ed. 2017). *resurrection* is not about Sarah Baartman; it is a poem on remembering/forgetting trauma, on the presence of blood in South African history and, in particular, on the living memory represented by graves.

[24] See: https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2018-09-21-dignifying-sarah-baartman (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[25] Advertised in London and Paris as 'typical' African female features, Sarah's sexual organs, that is the enlargement of her *labia minora* and the accumulation of fat in her posterior (*steatopygia*) attracted European curiosity.

[26] In her biography of Sarah Baartman, Rachel Holmes details the troubles Cesars had, as a non-white, in getting a pass from the governor to leave the Cape (Holmes 2007: 48). Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais, on the other hand, explain that free blacks were not necessarily black, the definition itself meaning in that context "with slave ancestors". Cesars was probably of ethnic mixed origin. In London he was identified as a Boer, which anyway meant as an enemy for the Brits (Scully & Crais 2008: 313).

and does not help our understanding. Furthermore, Sarah Baartman was discriminated against, and her body may have been sold – whether by her choice or not – years before she ventured to Europe. Coming from a (Khoikhoi) Gonaqua clan from the rural Eastern Cape and arriving in an ethnically and socially mixed, chaotic, relatively open to self-initiative city such as the bustling Cape Town of the times, Sarah must have experienced first-hand the prejudices reserved for Khoikhoi people, who could not be formally kept as slaves but who were nonetheless servants and, if they were women, also often prostitutes (Scully & Crais 2008: 311). On this part of Sarah's life, which is very interesting because it opens up a complex web of social discrimination dating before the black and white racialisation of the country, the biopic glosses over.

*Vénus noire*'s rendering of Sarah's life does not seem to get to the heart of the matter. Different is the case with the musical *Venus vs Modernity*, written by Lebogang Mashile and launched at the Johannesburg Market Theatre in 2019 under the direction of Pamela Nomvete and Koleka Putuma. There are no full-length videos of the production to our knowledge, but from some brief clips available on the web and interviews to Mashile herself (who plays Saartjie) and to opera-singer Ann Masina (who plays Venus)[27], we can get the idea of a performance eschewing historical verisimilitude with a view to conveying, instead, Sarah's emotions in the dual guise of what she felt and what she experienced. According to Mashile, two bodies/actresses were needed to stage the 'enormity' of Sarah's story, the schizophrenia she experienced, the difficult relationship between her inner and outer worlds, the trauma of her hypervisibility continually juxtaposed with her invisibility, a trait she shares with so many black women. Most of all, the play stems from the idea of Sarah's being both a freak and the most famous performer of her times (Mashile 2019). In order to allow the woman Saartjie and the icon Venus to interact and come to the fore, Mashile uses poetry, spoken words, dance, music, thus actually 'performing' the female identity in its full complexity, tensions and even contradictions.

That Sarah Baartman's *quid* does not lie in what we know about her from partial historical sources is what emerges from the opening of Makosazana Xaba's *Tongues of Their Mothers* (2008), a poem that lines up six 'historical' South African women, equally overshadowed by the men they stood beside. This is the 'liberating' stanza devoted to Sarah Baartman and outlining a different, new idea of history altogether:

> I wish to write an epic poem about Sarah Baartman,
> one that will be silent on her capturers, torturers and demolishers.
> It will say nothing of the experiments, the laboratories and the displays
> or even the diplomatic dabbles that brought her remains home,
> eventually.
> The poem will sing of the Gamtoos Valley holding imprints of her
> baby steps.

[27] See: https://www.facebook.com/VenusVsModernity/videos/363563051251574/?_rdr; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3SRH34cEZw; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enc595NoCaE (consulted on 10/07/2024).

It will contain rhymes about the games she played as a child,
stanzas will have names of her friends, her family, her community.
It will borrow from every single poem ever written about her,
conjuring up her wholeness: her voice, dreams, emotions and thoughts [...]
(Xaba 2008: 25).

**4. Rescuing a Drowned Archive in Verse**

Sarah Baartman's and Krotoa's overexposure, which includes the current use of their names for monuments and centres of cultural and/or social activities around South Africa[28], has generated, as sketched so far, appropriations of all kinds but has also revealed the need for a historical rewriting that can only be achieved through opening and extending the country's archives. The work of a new generation of women poets features the need to redress the same idea of archival evidence, locating in the water the memory site of both enslaved and native women.

Koleka Putuma's final lines of *you / who are monumented* remark:

[...]
in the twisting and turning and taming and titillating and tallying
all black history is established on a plantation
or slave ship
that conveniently drowns some biographies
and saves others
where men were slaves
who fought and made art
a history that made it into textbooks
and women were slaves
who fought and made art
a history
drowned in glass jars and museums
now we rotate libraries upside down
retrieving from the margins
lives connected to other lives
spilling the ones
they say
do not exist
(Putuma 2021: 39-40).

Slave women did not make it into textbooks and the passing reference to Baartman, "drowned in glass jars and museums", provides the concrete image of the fragmentation and isolation of women and of their history; even when they "fought and made art" as men did. In the face of their umpteenth erasure from an "established" historiography legitimately

[28] Such is the case of the *Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children* founded in Cape Town in 1999, where they take care of women and children who survived abuse within or outside their homes, https://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/ (consulted on 10/07/2024).

made of plantations and slave ships but featuring mostly men, women authors reclaim the right to overturn the cataloguing system of libraries, whose monotonous methods and results are signalled by the strong alliteration in the first line. The 'liquid' metaphor connecting drowned biographies to Baartman's drowned genitalia (and history) brings out unrecorded lives from the margins via an act of "spilling".

In a compelling performance at the 2023 *Bua! Poetry Slam*[29], singer/poet Jolyn Phillips impersonates Bientang, a native woman from the nineteenth century, whose memory is only preserved in the name of a marine cave[30] and a bunch of legendary details. Phillips, who is a skilled singer and musician, turned for the occasion *die walvis droom/the whale's dream*, a poem from her 2020 collection *bientang.'n !naugedig* (bientang. a poem of passage[31]), into a song combining spoken word and evocative chant[32]. The rich sea imagery (whales, waves, seaweed, ships) supports the identification of the woman with the coastal environment, thereby attesting to the pre-colonial history of the native 'beachcombers' by focusing on the banished woman who was, according to oral traditions, the 'last' of the tribe. Besides the specific artistic choice made in this collection, one should remark the historically strong connection, both cultural and material, between the Khoi (or KhoiSan people) of the Eastern Cape coast and the ocean as a dwelling environment and food source, as well as a spiritual site[33]. By concentrating along the whole collection on Bientang, Phillips provides us with a quite detailed 'herstory' and tackles the problem of heritage in sociocultural terms by addressing the issue of slavery as well.

Avowedly finding inspiration in a fish restaurant's name, the poet or scribe – the collection also features a poetic I who is the poet/witness/archivist – (re)creates Bientang's voice, providing some evidence that is lacking in the official records. Before telling her own name in her last lines, the woman's voice builds all she is and stands for through aquatic metaphors: "ek is 'n slaweskip wat deur die sand trek ek droom my vel word 'n net" ["*I am a slave ship that sails through the sand I dream my skin becomes a net*"] (Phillips 2020: 21).

The process of identity shaping of the I (both body and mind) then takes a turn towards the water. As opposed to the ship, the woman who is one with the sea, cannot disappear in the abyss:

> […]
> in my is ook water ja in my is ook donderstorms
> in my is ook die harsings so groen soos seegras

[29] This poetry slam was organised for the first time at the North-West University (NWU), South Africa, by the Creative Writing subject group in the School of Languages.

[30] Bientang's Cave, in Hermanus Bay, Western Cape.

[31] *nau* is a Khoi term indicating the age or period in which a young person undergoes an initiation rite. The use of lower case is an intentional choice in Phillips' work. This collection has already been discussed in a different context in Guarducci & Terrenato (2022: 78-81, 121-123).

[32] The performance can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hch3G1lE3is (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[33] See Minguzzi (2021: 22). The issue is also artistically explored by prominent writer Zakes Mda in his 2005 novel *The Whale Caller*.

in my is klippe en daar is 'n grot aan elke
swelselhoek van
my
lyf

en hier kan ek nie sink nie
[…]

[…]
*in me there is water too in me there are thunderstorms too […]*
*in me the brain is as green as seaweed*
*in me there are rocks and a cave*
*at every curve of*
*my*
*body*

*and here I cannot sink* […]
(Phillips 2020: 21).

Bientang's name and story will be preserved in the water and the rocks, whales will bear witness to her deeds, and her lasting presence is to be retrieved in forms – a ghost, a fossil – that eschew the common textual/visual manmade items in the archive. The archivist/poet is enquiring into a heritage that does not share the dominant white male preoccupation with the accuracy and tangibility of 'grounded' sources and opens up the chance of naming and 're-membering' through oral lore, ancient beliefs, and the 'memory of nature':

[…]
in die baai sal ek spook tot ek
fossiel in die baai
sal die noorkappers kom
herinner ek is bientang
[…]

*[…]*
*I will haunt the bay until I*
*fossilize in the bay*
*shall the whales come*
*and remind that I am bientang*
[…]
(Phillips 2020: 21).

Also Yvette Christiansë insists on the connection between the ocean and women's history. In her collection *Imprendehora* (2009)[34], she expands on the relationship between (the

[34] Imprendehora was a Portuguese slaver seised by the British in the crusade they opened after having approved the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

memory of) slavery and water. In the final section of the poem, titled *Ship's Register*, we are overwhelmed by the list of 29 persons (mainly children), supposedly "liberated Africans": 18 males, 9 females, 2 undefined. The section pretends to record the otherwise forgotten vessel's human cargo providing "the demographic details of trafficked bodies found and 'liberated' from a slave ship in the Indian Ocean" (Boswell 2016: 14). Among the details, the poem registers the name of the person's mother and alternates the inventory with the flow of thoughts of these 'disremembered' ancestors, often involving their maternal figures, in a fictional though plausible mosaic accounting for something that, in fact, actually happened to actual people. Liberation for them did not mean freedom, as they were relocated as "indentured labourers" (a more politically acceptable term for 'slaves') in other European possessions in the Southern world (Samuelson 2013: 9-11 and 2014: 36-37; Hofmeyr 2007). The maternal lineage reported in the register evokes images of possible historical roots, of home and protection, of community, of oral cultural heritage. In short, these lines (re)create what was once a system, a network of relations, an articulated world – disrupted by the dominant historical narrative – stemming from the specificity of each individual:

346 Salome. Age 4. Stature 3-4
Mother's name Touamouyoo
My mother's name
grows like the roots
of a black tree

My mother's name
is a house whose roof
reaches over me

I open my mouth and she is a village
of words that buzz.
[...]

353 Female Tomasine. Age 5. Stature 3-4
Mother's name Lorratia
Several scars on left side of chest
This tooth is loose.
My mother says,
late tooth, long life.
Mistah Gebat says
eat, get big.
[...]

363 Male Onesiphon. Age 24. Stature 5-4½
Mother's name Yawah Teka
Open wide, my mother's name
hides in my throat. Push your tongue

back, my mother's name is wide [...]
(Christiansë 2009: 83, 85, 87).

Poetry picks the tales dismissed by historians, who colluded in the general amnesia affecting those exiled from the records, the many native and enslaved women and their children. For these poets the sea stands for a complex and open archive. Besides its materiality and its role in the slave routes, it evokes the obscurity in which unrecorded narrations drowned and the fluctuating movement with which mainstream culture shapes women's identities and assigns them meanings according to its current needs. Among other art forms, poetry seeks to restore their complexity in order to shield them from manipulations and biased readings.

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**Adriano Elia**

# 'Exits' and 'Entrances': Roger Robinson's Poetry between Performance and Self-promotion

**Abstract I:** Vincitore del *T. S. Eliot Prize* (2019) e dell'*Ondaatje Prize* (2020), Roger Robinson interpreta il ruolo di poeta contemporaneo valorizzando il concetto di *performance*. L'approccio di Robinson alla poesia prevede l'utilizzo di elementi performativi come letture dal vivo, presenza sui social media e collaborazioni musicali. Tale prospettiva rievoca il motto shakespeariano secondo cui 'tutto il mondo è un palcoscenico', in cui le uscite e le entrate, artistiche e personali, sono cruciali nel plasmare i discorsi. Il saggio considera l'attività di Robinson tra *performance* e autopromozione, concentrando l'attenzione sui molteplici aspetti performativi che caratterizzano il ruolo di poeta nell'era digitale.

**Abstract II:** Winner of the *T. S. Eliot Prize* (2019) and the *Ondaatje Prize* (2020), Roger Robinson takes on the role of the contemporary poet enhancing the concept of performance. Robinson's approach to poetry involves using performative elements such as live readings, social media presence, and musical collaborations. This perspective evokes the Shakespearean motto that '[a]ll the world's a stage', where artistic and personal entrances and exits are crucial in shaping discourse. The essay considers Robinson's activities between performance and self-promotion, focusing on the multiple performative aspects that characterise the role of the poet in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Roger Robinson, performance, self-promotion, poetry, digital age, social media.

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts
> (Shakespeare 1993a: 150-151).

Well into the 21st century, social media and the digital revolution have profoundly affected cultural production and reception and will continue to do so relentlessly. The increasingly ubiquitous presence of artificial intelligence is prefiguring unpredictable scenarios, leading experts to confront difficult questions regarding the modalities of control over such unprecedented phenomena.

Like virtually every other field, poetry writing has been impacted by the new state of affairs. The romantic notion of the poet, who recollects emotions in solitude and hopes that someone, somewhere will appreciate the effort is long gone. Today, those involved in cultural production, including poets, must perform multiple identities and take self-promotion seriously. Being active on social media and crossing artistic boundaries are now essential to reach diverse audiences. Gaining recognition and building an audience require this engagement; a mysterious absence of information as a hype-creating strategy now seems like a self-destructive move doomed to failure.

Most contemporary poets from around the world have become aware of this scenario and started behaving accordingly. Being the quintessence of personal and artistic hybridity, Roger Robinson is no exception. Born in London in 1967 to Trinidadian parents, Robinson moved to Trinidad during his childhood, later returning to the United Kingdom when he was nineteen. This dual identity, combining both insider and outsider perspectives, enabled him to explore feelings of disconnection within the black British community, mostly through his nuanced and richly textured poetry. Moreover, Robinson tested himself in different art forms (short fiction, essay writing, music, spoken word), paying careful attention to the performative aspects of his works.

In this essay, we will consider the multifaceted aspects of Robinson's output, as well as the ways in which he engages in its promotion and performative aspects, to reflect on the role of the contemporary poet today. More precisely, we will investigate the extent to which self-promotion and performance, both personal and artistic, have become crucial means for becoming an acknowledged and respected cultural figure. Contemporary poets like Robinson adopt a transmedial approach to reach a broader audience, and reinterpret and criticise an updated version of the Shakespearean metaphor of the world as a stage.

## 1. The World as a Stage Today

The analogy of the world as a stage and people as actors existed long before Shakespeare's time. This trope has roots in the philosophical works of Plato. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato presented the allegory of the cave, where he depicted people as prisoners observing shadows on a wall, similar to spectators in a theatre. This allegory explores the roles individuals play in society, echoing the idea of life as a staged performance. Although Plato did not explicitly use the phrase 'the world as a stage', his philosophical inquiries into the nature of reality and human roles align with the essence of this metaphor. Seneca also used this metaphor, notably in his essay *De brevitate vitae*, where he investigated the transitory nature of life and the various roles people play throughout their existence. Reflecting the essence of his Stoic philosophy, Seneca compared life to a play in which people are actors who must perform their parts, suggesting that what matters is not the length of life but the excellence of the acting.

Later examples include *Moriae encomium* (1511), in which Renaissance humanist Erasmus blurred the lines between life and play. As he noted, removing masks from actors on stage would ruin a play by exposing their real identities: by the same token, uncovering the true nature of people who perform multiple identities in life could upset the social order

and the roles individuals play in society[1]. A similar metaphorical perspective emerges in Richard Edwards' play *Damon and Pythias*, written in 1564, the year Shakespeare was born, which contains the lines: "Pythagoras said that this world was like a stage / Whereon many play their parts; the lookers-on, the sage" (Edwards 2019). Moreover, when it was founded in 1599, Shakespeare's own theatre, *The Globe*, may have used the motto "totus mundus agit histrionem" ("the whole world acts as a player"), which was based on the earlier sentence "quod fere totus mundus exercet histrionem" ("because almost the whole world acts as an actor"), attributed to Petronius (Garber 2008: 292). To conclude this necessarily partial overview, in Act I, Scene I of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare also has one of his main characters, Antonio, compare the world to a stage: "I hold the world but as the world, Graziano, A stage where every man must play a part, And mine a sad one" (Shakespeare 1993b: 107).

But what does this metaphor mean today? In what ways do contemporary poets, writers, and artists engage with it? Although the context has changed, the metaphor remains relevant. Poets continue to explore how individuals present themselves and interact in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. For instance, poets like Robinson examine how social media and digital platforms have transformed life into a performative act, where individuals curate their identities and experiences for public consumption. In this regard, the critical tools of Performance Studies and Deconstruction can be valuable for understanding how contemporary poets like Robinson address issues of performance and self-promotion.

**2. Robinson and Performance**

As is known, Richard Schechner broadened the concept of performance to include not just theatrical events, but also rituals, sports, dance, and social interactions. He noted that all human activities can be seen as performances, where individuals enact roles and follow scripts dictated by cultural norms and societal expectations. Taking his cue from Erving Goffman's 1959 groundbreaking book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Schechner argued in the 2003 Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition of his own pioneering volume *Performance Theory* (1977) that

> performances in the broad sense of that word were coexistent with the human condition. […] What Goffman meant was that people were always involved in role-playing, in constructing and staging their multiple identities. […] To do this, they deployed socio-theatrical conventions (or "routines") even as they devised personae (sometimes consciously, mostly without fully being cognizant of what was happening) adapted to particular circumstances (Schechner 2003: ix-x).

Being a poet today is more influenced than ever by the concept of performance. Contemporary poets frequently present their work at readings, slams, and festivals, where

[1] "Si quis histrionibus in scena fabulam agentibus personas detrahere conetur, ac spectatoribus veras nativasque facies ostenderel, nonne is fabulam omnem perverterit, dignusque habeatur, quem omnes e theatro velut lymphatum saxis eiiciant?" (Erasmus 1511).

the act of reading transforms into a performance. Schechner's theories can help analyse how poets like Robinson – as well as others such as Saul Williams, Anthony Joseph, and Kae Tempest, to name a few – utilise voice, gesture, and space to animate their written words. Robinson's performances are renowned for their intensity and their ability to connect deeply with the audience. His delivery and stage presence further amplify the empathetic impact of his work.

Similar to actors performing on stage, most contemporary poets engage in performance through their writings, readings, and public appearances. Social media functions as a contemporary virtual stage where poets showcase both their art and personal identities. This form of performance includes their creative output as well as their interactions, reflections, and personal revelations. Schechner's ideas about the broadened definition of performance help us understand how poets handle their online *personae* and engage with virtual audiences. To this purpose, a transmedial approach becomes increasingly important, as poets collaborating with artists from other fields (such as musicians or visual artists) participate in intercultural performances and foster new forms of poetic expression.

Robinson is well aware of the importance of crossing artistic and disciplinary boundaries. It is significant that, on his official website, he is described as an "internationally acclaimed poet, writer, performer, educator & mentor", as well as a "workshop leader" who "brings his cultural depth and passion for poetry to global audiences" (Robinson 2024a). Robinson started out as a spoken word artist with dub poetry – he views dub as "the poetry of working-class suffering and protest" (Armitstead 2020). Later, he became involved in musical projects, recording solo albums with Jahtari Records and serving as the lead vocalist and lyricist for King Midas Sound and The Bug. These days, it is impossible for a poet to be just a poet; one must engage in various related activities that benefit from one another.

However, Robinson still seems to cherish a traditional approach to the poet's role. This approach involves emphasising the significance of practice, which is the foundation of the quality of any poet's work:

> My experience in teaching has been primarily to show that writers are not born but made from consistent practise and craft. I have found writing to be highly correlated with reading. You can't have the creative development you seek without first finding enjoyment in the written word (Robinson 2024b).

In *On Poetry*, Robinson confirms that practice remains the most crucial aspect for a successful performance:

> Some people are interested in performance but believe that they are interested in poetry. Poets are people who put their bums in their chairs to read and write poetry, in order to get it to an audience. That's it, that's all and if you do that on some kind of regular basis you are in the practice of poetry. When I teach, I like to say that for every poem you attempt to write, you should at least read thirty to fifty poems and establish what threads and techniques you notice, then try to see if you can apply them in a new piece of work somehow (Robinson 2023b: 117).

To elaborate on the notion of the poet's creativity, Robinson introduced an acronym, MVAS, to define a useful concept: a "minimum viable artistic starter" (Robinson 2023a: 11). This refers to "a very small creative act to get your day started. For a poet, it might be a haiku. For an artist it might be a blind sketch. For a musician, it might be to play a favourite song […] an MVAS might jumpstart a full day of creative artistic flow". These reflections reveal that, in addition to focusing on the performative aspects of poetry, Robinson still relies on a traditional approach to the poet's role, involving practice, self-discipline, and work ethic.

Robinson's poetry often highlights this tension between the private self and the public *persona*. In this context, he incisively analyses crucial issues such as collective and personal trauma in his award-winning collection *A Portable Paradise*. His moving examination of the Grenfell Tower fire on June 14, 2017, in North Kensington, London, brings a human dimension to the tragedy by focusing on the personal stories and emotions of those affected, especially in the poem "The Missing" (Robinson 2019)[2]:

> As if their bodies became lighter,
> ten of those seated
> in front pews began to float,
> and then to lie down as if on
> a bed. Then pass down the aisle,
> as if on a conveyor belt of pure air,
> slow as a funeral cortege,
> past the congregants, some sinking
> to their knees in prayer.
> One woman, rocking back and forth,
> muttered, *What about me Lord*
> *why not me?*

Here, Robinson's transmedial approach is evident, as the poem was adapted into lyrics for an experimental track by The Bug, which bears the same title and was released in 2021 by the Ninja Tune label on the album *Fire*. The poet implicitly suggests that media coverage of the tragedy will never convey the necessary detail and intensity to fully capture the struggles of those impacted by this devastating event. This, in turn, leads to a desensitisation of the audience, causing them to fail to empathise with and grasp the painful effect of the tragedy.

Personal trauma is examined in two poems – "Grace" and "On Nurses" – which depict the challenges faced by nurses, a profession where empathy is paramount. Drawing from his own experience of almost losing his son, Robinson recounts how the exceptional care of a West Indian NHS nurse named Grace ensured the survival of his prematurely born son: "On the ward I met Grace. A Jamaican senior nurse / who sang pop songs on her shift, like they were hymns. […] / Even the doctors gave way to her, when it comes / to putting a line into my son's nylon thread of a vein" (Robinson 2019: 69)[3]. With its meticulous language,

[2] Elia (2024).

[3] Elia (2024).

this poem skilfully dissects the emotional and physical repercussions of personal trauma, forging a profound connection with the reader. Its authenticity lays bare the intricate and sometimes conflicting emotions entwined with pain and suffering.

Ultimately, Robinson is positioned between two forces: one traditional, grounded in practice and self-discipline, and the other oriented towards the present and future, emphasising performance and self-promotion. Regarding the latter, and in line with Goffman's perspective that the metaphor of the world as a stage implies a certain falseness in self-presentation, Robinson acknowledges that this metaphor can challenge the authenticity of performances and highlight the pressure to conform to societal expectations (Goffman 2022: 52 ff.).

In this context, Foucault's philosophy can help assess the authenticity of performance. As is widely acknowledged, his theories are particularly relevant for examining how societal expectations and roles are constructed and enforced. With regard to the role of the contemporary poet, Foucault's concept of discourse is essential, as it shapes and constructs knowledge, influencing our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Foucault 2002). Discourse is more than just a way of speaking; it is a system of representation that dictates how we think, speak, and act. It establishes what is considered true, normal, and acceptable in society, thereby exerting power over individuals. Another relevant Foucauldian concept is subjectivation, which refers to how individuals are shaped into subjects through discourses and power relations. This process involves internalising societal norms and expectations, often resulting in self-regulation and conformity. In a world seen as a stage, individuals might feel pressured to perform according to these norms, suppressing their authentic selves to comply to assigned roles.

When we apply Foucault's ideas to the metaphor of the world as a stage, we see how societal discourses shape the roles individuals are expected to play. These roles are not inherent or natural, but are constructed through language and social practices. Robinson's poetry reflects the tension between individual identity and the roles imposed by societal discourses. The poet is aware of these opposing forces: while adhering to a traditional view of the poet's role, he critiques the social expectations and platforms where individuals must present themselves. At the same time, he recognises that maintaining a regular presence on social media is a crucial aspect of being a poet today. Posts, reels, and stories constantly show him sharing reflections on the poet's craft, performing new songs in musical collaborations, and even disclosing unpublished poems. Whether one likes it or not, online self-promotion has now become an almost compulsory strategy for anyone involved in cultural production.

**3. Robinson and Self-promotion**

In the Autumn 2017 edition of *The Poetry Review*, Robinson produced his own poetry manifesto, a series of musings on the artistic process serving as advice for poets (Robinson 2017). Among the themes, several reflections warn against adopting a victim mentality or becoming self-satisfied: "Don't become a victim and a complainer. Success depends on your willpower, productivity, and practice. You shouldn't even have time to complain"; "The world belongs to poets who can finish. Don't have many open-ended projects just floating. Give yourself a time and a date and finish it" (Robinson 2017). Robinson consequently

focuses on the importance of self-promotion – for him, unseen poems cannot even be considered finished, as it is the very act of reading that completes them: "Your poems aren't finished until you present them to an audience. It's unfinished if it's stuck in a drawer somewhere"; "I think the basics are to get good (i.e., craft) and get seen (i.e., stages, journals, blogs, magazines, social media); that's it"; "Poets, reject the sacred cows of your industry. Put no structures in authority. Get work seen and sold" (Robinson 2017).

Traditional publishing is still an effective way to reach a wider audience, especially when, as in the case of Robinson's poetry collection *A Portable Paradise*, it leads to prestigious literary prizes such as the *T. S. Eliot Prize* (2019) and the *Ondaatje Prize* (2020). These achievements granted Robinson validation and credibility, significantly increasing his visibility, media coverage, and social media presence, which led to a boost in sales and readership. Additionally, they opened doors for further publication and participation in literary events such as poetry readings, literary festivals, workshops, and conferences. These successes also enhanced his networking opportunities, provided access to funding and residencies, and offered international exposure, including translation opportunities and a global readership.

However, the impact of the digital revolution has driven contemporary poets like Robinson to adopt various strategies to create a stronger connection with the literary community. Maintaining an online presence is essential: a professional website and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X are now necessary for sharing poems, thoughts on poetry, writing processes, and more. This scenario requires what we may define as an *orchestral performative act* on the part of the poet. In other words, Robinson the person performs as Robinson the social media *persona*, who in turn describes the work of Robinson the poet, who is the spokesperson for Robinson the person. The cycle is complete, but there can definitely be short circuits that blur the roles, the persons, and the *personae*, creating a plurality of identities that at times overlap and intersect with each other.

This multiplicity of selves can be analysed through Jacques Derrida's insights to understand self-promotion in a philosophical context. Derrida's philosophy challenges the stability of identity, and self-promotion implies a deconstruction of identities. This means that any presentation of oneself is inherently unstable and open to reinterpretation. The identity one promotes is not fixed, but subject to the play of differences and deferrals – what Derrida calls 'différance' – (Derrida 1982: xliii). Moreover, in self-promotion, the way one writes or speaks about oneself is never a complete representation; it always leaves out some aspects and includes others, thus creating a presence-absence dynamic – self-promotion, therefore, is always a partial and constructed narrative.

One recurring motif in Derrida's criticism is the concept of iterability. Iterability refers to the idea that any sign (or, in this case, self-promotion message) can be repeated and reinterpreted across various contexts. This capacity for repetition allows signs to retain a degree of identity while being open to different interpretations depending on the context in which they appear. For self-promotion, this means that once an individual promotes themselves, the message can be taken up, repeated, and transformed by others in ways that may extend beyond or even diverge from the original intention.

Self-promotion also leads the way to what Derrida defines 'spectral' or 'ghostly': the image one tries to convey is always haunted by what is left unsaid, unseen, or forgotten. The self being promoted is a ghostly presence, more a projection than a reality. Derrida coined the term 'hauntology' – a portmanteau of haunting and ontology – to refer to the presence of elements from the past that persist in the present as spectral traces (Derrida 1994).

Drawing on and expanding the ideas of Derrida, Mark Fisher discussed how cultural artifacts, memories, and lost futures haunt contemporary life. He sees hauntology as a way to understand how modern culture is preoccupied with its own past. Fisher's concept of the 'spectral' is particularly prominent in his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014), where he combines Derrida's notion of hauntology with cultural analysis to discuss how contemporary society is haunted by the past and the lost futures it once promised. Fisher provides a compelling framework for understanding how the past continues to shape and haunt the present, often in ways that limit our ability to envision and achieve new futures. His exploration of ghosts and the spectral through the lens of hauntology offers a profound critique of contemporary culture and politics.

Hauntology and self-promotion may intersect in different ways. Self-promotion frequently incorporates elements of nostalgia, which can be examined through a hauntological perspective. For example, poets may use past styles or cultural references to create a sense of familiarity and emotional resonance. This nostalgic approach can be viewed as a manifestation of hauntology, where echoes of the past influence contemporary promotional tactics. Moreover, in the era of social media, an individual's digital footprint often serves as a 'ghost' of their previous selves. Earlier posts, images, and interactions continue to shape and impact current self-promotion efforts. This lingering digital presence can affect how one is perceived and can be strategically utilised or managed in promotional activities. Individuals often draw on historical or cultural references in their self-promotion to establish a sense of continuity with the past. This approach aligns with hauntology, as it involves engaging with spectral cultural elements from earlier times to forge connections with contemporary audiences.

This philosophical framework thus provides a rich lens through which to consider the complexities and ethical dimensions of presenting oneself in various public and personal arenas. Robinson's is a case in point in this context. Applying Derrida's and Fisher's ideas to self-promotion in contemporary contexts such as social media, professional networking, or personal branding involves embracing ambiguity – acknowledging the inherent incompleteness of any self-representation and the fact that self-promotion messages are always ambiguous and open to different interpretations – as well as recognising the need for continuous reinterpretation, understanding that self-promotion is an ongoing process where one's image is constantly reshaped by various interactions and contexts. Typical examples of Robinson's approach to self-promotion include his social media advertisement for "20 Ways to Be a Better Poet", an online, streamable video poetry workshop accompanied by a *Nature Poetry Workshop* booklet and his e-books *On Poetry* and *On Creativity*. This bundle offers all the processes, tips, and prompts necessary for intermediate poets. As Robinson aims to make poetry education accessible to all, the bundle is sold through a Pay What You Can

option. Moreover, the widespread availability of videos showing him delivering his poems, whether intentionally produced or captured at poetry festivals, is also having a tangible impact. These strategies help enhance and reshape the connection between Robinson as both a person and a poet and his audience.

**4. 'Exits' and 'Entrances'**

The metaphor of the world as a stage serves therefore to question the authenticity of personal and artistic performances. Jaques's speech in *As You Like It* describes life as a series of performances, with people making their 'exits' and their 'entrances' on the world's stage. Applying this concept to the role of contemporary poets suggests exploring how they navigate their private selves and public façades, much like actors on a stage, particularly in the age of social media.

The concepts of entrances and exits in the everyday performances of contemporary poets can be considered in several meaningful ways. With respect to digital presence, entrances occur when poets share new work, participate in online events, or engage with their audience on social media. These moments provide opportunities to connect with their readership and make a lasting impression. Conversely, exits occur when poets take breaks from social media. These rare and temporary departures can leave the audience wanting more or provide essential space for reflection and creativity.

In public appearances, entrances involve participation in public readings, book launches, and literary festivals. These events are key moments for building reputation, sharing work, and engaging directly with the audience. Exits happen when poets step away from the public eye. These exits can be as significant as the entrances, signaling the end of a creative period, or simply a need for personal time. In the creative process, entrances occur when starting a new project, publishing a new book, or entering a new phase of creative research. Exits, on the other hand, happen when completing a project, finishing a poem, or deciding to leave certain themes behind. These exits allow the poet to move on to new creative endeavours.

In interpersonal interactions, entrances involve engaging in collaborations, forming new professional relationships, and connecting with fans and other writers. These are entrances into new social and professional spaces. Conversely, exits happen when ending collaborations or choosing to move away from certain communities. These exits shape the poet's professional and personal landscape. Regarding emotional engagement, entrances occur when examining different emotive and intellectual ideas, and opening up about personal experiences. These entrances can deeply affect the poet's work and audience. Exits happen when moving past certain emotional states, or deciding to keep certain experiences private. These exits can lead to growth and change in the poet's work.

This complex scenario highlights the nuances of the everyday activities of contemporary poets like Robinson. Exits and entrances for contemporary poets are multifaceted moments of transition, crucial in shaping their careers, artistic evolution, and relationships with their audience. While poets often experience both entrances and exits in public appearances, creative processes, interpersonal interactions, and emotional engagements, entering the digital realm represents a virtually irreversible shift. It is very unlikely that one can fully exit from it.

We have thus considered the multifaceted nature of Robinson's work and the methods

he uses to promote and perform it, reflecting on the role of the contemporary poet today. When asked about the significance of receiving the *Ondaatje Prize*, Robinson replied that it allowed him to gain more influence within the literary industry, which for him meant engaging in more socially conscious work[4]. In this respect, performance and self-promotion, both personal and artistic, play a role of utmost importance. As we have seen, Robinson embodies a version of the contemporary poet that transcends mere verse composition to fully embrace the concept of performance. This perspective evokes the Shakespearean motto that '[a]ll the world's a stage', where exits and entrances, both personal and artistic, are crucial in shaping discourses in a Foucauldian sense.

It is fascinating to consider how poets like Sylvia Plath or T. S. Eliot would approach self-promotion and social media if they were alive today. Most likely, they might have resisted using social media, which could potentially limit their visibility. Conversely, it is a rather surreal thought, but perhaps, like Robinson and many contemporary poets, they might have embraced performative elements through live readings and an online presence. It remains to be seen if future poets and artists can gain recognition and respect without adopting performative strategies and online self-promotion, or if, regardless of their merit, such strategies have become indispensable in the digital age.

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# *A Woman Is Talking To Death*: Judy Grahn and The Feminist Poetry Movement

**Abstract I:** Il *feminist poetry movement* è una corrente della poesia americana degli anni Settanta che, come altri movimenti quali quello dei *Beat poets* degli anni Cinquanta e quello dei poeti antimilitaristi degli anni Sessanta, realizza una combinazione di arte e politica. Lo straordinario poema *A Woman Is Talking To Death* della poeta femminista lesbica *working-class* Judy Grahn, pubblicato nel 1973 e accolto con entusiasmo nel contesto del movimento di liberazione delle donne e in innumerevoli *reading* di poesia, intreccia esperienza soggettiva e collettiva e denuncia l'intricato nesso di oppressioni sulla base del genere, della sessualità, della razza e della classe, molto prima che venisse coniato il termine "intersezionalità".

**Abstract II:** The "feminist poetry movement" of the 1970s constitutes a distinct current in American poetry and, like other movements such as the Beat poets of the 1950s and the antiwar poets of the 1960s, achieves a combination of art and politics. The groundbreaking long poem *A Woman Is Talking To Death* by working-class lesbian-feminist poet Judy Grahn, published in 1973 and enthusiastically received in the context of the women's liberation movement, and at innumerable poetry readings, weaves together subjective and collective experience and denounces the intricate nexus of oppressions on the basis of gender, sexuality, race and class, long before the term "intersectionality" was coined.

**Keywords:** feminist poetry, Grahn, lesbian feminism, women's liberation movement, intersectionality.

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. […]
> Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought
> (Lorde 1984: 36).

## 1. The Feminist Poetry Movement: A Political and Poetic Revolution

First published in the December 1973 issue of the militant journal *Amazon Quarterly*, Judy Grahn's long poem *A Woman Is Talking To Death* is an extraordinary example of the combination of art and politics which characterised the feminist poetry movement in the United States between the 1960s and '70s. The poem was republished as a chapbook with illustrations by Karen Sjöholm in 1974 by the Women's Press Collective (Fig. 1), the first all-

woman press in the US (Garber 2001: 31). It was read in innumerable poetry readings and gained immense popularity in the national network of the women's liberation movement. Adrienne Rich, by then an established poet, described weeping when she first read *A Woman Is Talking To Death* (Rich 1980: 249) and recalled the experience of listening to Judy Grahn reciting the poem in 1974, in New York's Greenwich Village, by commenting that "[it] was a boundary-breaking poem for me: it exploded both desire and politics" (Rich 1993: 172). The powerful intensity of this poetic work crossed the boundaries of feminist circles when it was re-published in its entirety in the *American Poetry Review* in 1979. The inclusion of this text in a periodical of the "poetry establishment" (Whitehead 1996: xiii) signals the extent both of its success and of its poetic force, especially considering that, unlike Adrienne Rich's, Judy Grahn's poetry "does not emerge from the academy but from the streets" (Gale 2009). Its author is a self-identified working-class lesbian, a fact that, as Kim Whitehead remarks (1996: 55), placed Grahn "squarely outside the commercial literary realm, and even resulted in her exclusion from academic feminist conversations" for some time.

Judy Grahn played a central role in the early development of the feminist poetry movement, "one of the vital countertraditional poetic communities born in the cultural and political upheaval of the 1960s" (Whitehead 1996: xx). As has been observed, in the revolutionary cultural climate of those years, several political movements moved poetry from "polite lecture halls and quiet living rooms into the streets […] but no one did it more intensely or effectively than the poets of the women's movement" (Reed 2005: 87). It is important to note that the feminist poetry movement constitutes a distinct current not only in American poetry, but also "among women poets" (Whitehead 1996: xvi), as "feminist poet" is not equivalent to "woman poet". Analogous to the Beat poets of the 1950s and the antiwar poets of the 1960s, feminist poets are militant writers who see art and politics as inseparable; however, their verse does not sink into propaganda or mere sloganeering (Whitehead 1996: xx). Although feminists have widely recognized their value, scholars have only recently noticed their importance in literary history, both for the level of their aesthetic achievement and as a community of poets with a political vision (Whitehead 1996; Garber 2001; Thoms Flannery 2005; Reed 2005; Berke 2016).

Poetry was one of the means of expression for militant feminists since the very beginning of the women's liberation movement, as testified by the early anthology of political writings, *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (Morgan 1970), which included a section entitled "Poetry as Protest". The boom in women's publishing connected with the establishment of women's presses and bookstores was extraordinary: more than seventy feminist periodicals and more than sixty presses were operating between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s (Seajay 1990: 56-57). In this vibrant environment, feminists realised the alliance between poetry and politics and fuelled the return to poetry as public performance that had begun with the Beat poets. During what has been called a "highly dramatic, performative era" (Reed 2005: 103), hundreds of public readings were organized at feminist bookstores, music festivals, demonstrations and rallies: poetry was no longer a solitary art, but a collective practice (Berke 2016: 156) through which the poet's personal experience could resonate in a large community. Judy Grahn recalls that "masses of women" attended lesbian-feminist poetry readings in the early days of the movement


Fig. 1. The 1974 edition by The Women's Press Collective, Oakland (used with permission).

(1985: xviii). In her 1982 pamphlet-essay *A Movement of Poets*, reflecting back on more than a decade of feminist poetry, Jan Clausen emphasised "the catalytic role of poets and poetry" (1982: 5) in the American women's movement and she also identified lesbian poetry as the driving force behind the larger phenomenon of feminist poetry.

**2. Interlocking Oppressions**

Judy Grahn wrote *The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke*, her first working-class-identified lesbian work, in 1964-65, before the emergence of the women's liberation movement and before Stonewall (Garber 2001: 34)[1]. Her writing contributed to the explosion of lesbian poetry that began in the 1970s (Garber 2001: 32). On one level *A Woman Is Talking To Death* may be read as a poem primarily relevant for lesbians, as the poet adopts a lesbian feminist perspective, but on another important level the author makes her particular view of society relevant to a wide politically engaged audience, as her lesbian-feminist politics and her poetic themes focus "on various forms of oppression – classism, sexism, racism" (Garber 2001: 44). Grahn's poetic voice speaks from the socially abject position of an unemployed lesbian woman in early-1970s homophobic America but, through her feminist perspective, recalls experiences of oppression that are common to all women under patriarchy: references to several kinds of male violence are scattered throughout the text (sexual abuse, domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, the witch trials). At the same time, the poem denounces violence stemming from other social power relations: police brutality toward black people, the racism of the criminal justice system, economic oppression, the senseless violence of war and the industrial military complex.

[1] In those years Grahn could not find a publisher for *Edward the Dyke* (Grahn 2009: 313), a satire on psychoanalysis and its "scientific" treatment of homosexuality. She then published it in 1971, in the collection *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* with The Women's Press. Grahn's reclaiming of words such as "dyke" and "queer" was pioneering and especially daring at the time. She "transforms the pejorative words like dyke and queer by recontextualizing them (twenty years before the rise of queer theory and the invention of the annual Dyke March)" (Garber 2001: 43).

In this groundbreaking work, Grahn weaves together in a single text subjective and collective experience to illustrate the nexus of power social relations in which all individuals are involved. In the same years the Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective described these relations as "*interlocking*" systems of oppression in their 1977 Statement, long before the term "intersectionality" appeared. Besides its aesthetic value, *A Woman Is Talking To Death* is one of the documents testifying the acute awareness of multiple social oppressions widespread in 1970s radical feminism. Its historical value is especially important as, despite an abundance of historical evidence, feminists from the second-wave, considered as a unified block, have been "mishistoricized, dismissed too quickly as middle-class, consciousness raising, essentializing white women" (Rhodes 2005: 22) by the academic narration prevailing since the 1990s. The political awareness, within feminism, of what Jules Falquet (2009) has called the "*embrication"* (interdependence) of social relations has been anachronistically post-dated to the mere coinage of the term "intersectionality" by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989[2]. Yet, as Grahn herself points out, "[we] feminist poets, […] Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and me […] wrote of the intersections in our lives" (Grahn 2016: 17), a practice that contributed to form political ideas in the 1970s and beyond. These feminist poets wrote from their own direct experience: Grahn (2009: 312) recalled being one of the white radicals who acted as a human shield against police bullets to defend a Black Panther Office in San Francisco in a state of siege in 1969. She went on to establish the Women's Press Collective in Oakland with other militant feminists who had all been active in other movements (gay liberation, antiwar, and environmental). For many years, she worked with the black feminist poet and former Black Panther Pat Parker (1944-1989). Grahn and Parker were "intensely collaborative poet comrades" (Grahn 2016: 15), read their poems together and in 1976 recorded a poetry album, *Where Would I Be Without You – The Poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn*, for Olivia Records.

As we shall see, in *A Woman Is Talking To Death* Grahn's personal narration of her experience as a member of a dominated social group (woman, lesbian, working-class) is masterfully intertwined with the condemnation of interlocking systems of oppression and with her call for solidarity, resistance and rebellion.

**3. The Art of a "Working-class Elegist"**

The goal of transforming ordinary language into poetic words which possess "a density of signification, i.e. an inherent polysemy" (Corti 1976: 99, my translation) is realised by Judy Grahn through a lesbian speaking voice who is "a figure both of the satirist and the seer" (Carruthers 1983: 294). This ability to combine parodic elements, bitter humour and an intensely visionary, even prophetic, tone is evident in *A Woman Is Talking To Death* right from the poem's title: here the poet plays upon the figure of speech "talking to death" (i.e. talking endlessly) which is commonly referred, in misogynist discourse, to women's garrulity and

[2] As has been noted, "the question is not purely academic, if one considers that the adjective 'intersectional' has come into current use to qualify a feminism that is inclusive of 'differences', but perhaps not as aggressive when it comes to questioning, criticizing and attacking the social dynamics of their reproduction" (Ardilli 2018; my translation).

elevates it into a mythical dimension where the character of Death is addressed directly by the female protagonist of the poem. Not only does "new meaning thus arise out of language that is familiar" (Aviram 1987: 38), but patriarchal discourse is subverted and turned inside out by a female speaking subject.

The poem, divided into nine sections of various lengths, is written in free verse and poetic prose, and contains dialogues and interrogations, with a subtle combination of everyday language and lyrical images. The sections are tied together by the skilful use of repetitions and refrains, which indicate that the text is especially geared towards performance[3]. Adrienne Rich (1980: 250) praised the language of the poem, its repetitions, rhythms, and intricate structure "which may not be obvious on a first reading or hearing, but which works like the complexity of a piece of music".

The first section's title, "Testimony in trials that never got heard", introduces the public dimension of the poem's topic, while the opening lines evoke the private dimension of love, which, as we shall see, is not only personal, but political:

> my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me
> my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands[4].

While the ensuing verses consist of a narrative in everyday language and a matter-of-fact tone ("We were driving home …"), this opening couplet, with its anaphora and regular long stresses (Aviram 1987: 39), employs the incantatory language of eroticism. These two verses are especially important as they function as the poem's refrain, appearing again, with some variation, in sections five and nine, when the speaker is engaged in her confrontation with Death.

These opening lines, evoking parts of the body of the beloved, possess a remarkable quality: by choosing body parts unmarked by gender – "teeth" and "muscles" – Grahn challenges and re-invents the conventional love lyric of the Petrarchan (heterosexual) tradition where the female body is objectified through the male gaze and fragmented into eroticized parts. Through her strategy of *dé-marquage*, the author evades the capture of the lesbian body by the heterosexual/pornographic gaze[5]. At the same time, the unusual similes (teeth compared to geese and muscles compared to rope ladders) create lyrical images conveying ideas of freedom, flight and upward movement.

Commenting on *A Woman Is Talking To Death* in 1978, Grahn asserted that "this poem is as factual as I could possibly make it" (1978: 112): indeed, after the lyrical images of the

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[3] Repetitions and refrains give "an oral dimension to the reading of a poem, inviting the audience to participate" and they create a unity of theme and form (Whitehead 1996: 45).

[4] All quotations from the poem refer to the first edition (Grahn 1974), with unnumbered pages.

[5] A similar strategy of *dé-marquage*, i.e. referring to the physical body freed from gender marking, is used more extensively by Monique Wittig in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973). As Deborah Ardilli explains, "*dé-marquage* is the strategy implemented by the minority subject to eradicate the signs of subalternity and occupy the place of the universal confiscated by the dominant. Decomposing the body into inferior parcels, de/marking it from the selective valorization (lips, breasts, buttocks, reproductive apparatus) that make up the myth of Woman, 'pulverising the heterosexual symbolic construction of the female body'" (Ardilli 2023: 49-50; my translation).

opening couplet, the first section of the poem presents the narrative account of a very factual experience, the recollection of an accident on the Bay Bridge on a cold February night, involving a black driver who killed a white man on a motorcycle through no fault of his own. The "queer" woman speaker of the poem happens to be on the site of the accident with her partner, and this leads to a series of interconnected events, reflections and recollections that unfold through the sections that compose the poem.

From the tale of the car accident witnessed by the speaker the idea of the "testimony" is developed, and the text becomes a meditation on the social system and on the transformative power of "love" – a concept which is expanded in unpredictable ways as the poem progresses. The protagonist will not act as witness for the innocent black driver involved in the accident, as she herself belongs to an oppressed group constantly under trial. A white working-class lesbian woman and a black man are united by their vulnerability as subaltern social subjects in a situation of danger, and are both associated with fear in the intense dialogue that takes place on the bridge, at night, immediately after the tragic event:

> I'm frightened, I said.
> I'm afraid, he said, stay with me,
> please don't go, stay with me, be
> my witness – "No," I said, "I'll be
> your witness – later," and I took his name
> and number, "but I can't stay with you,
> I'm too frightened of the bridge, besides
> I have a woman waiting
> and no license –
> and no tail lights –"
> So I left –
> as I have left so many of my lovers.

The reference to abandoning "lovers", which appears unexpectedly at this point in the narrative, is the first instance of the re-signification of "love" that will be realised in the rest of the poem: "love" is "purged of romantic-sentimental associations" (Rich 1980: 251); it is not only (and not primarily) an erotic feeling, but it comes to stand for revolutionary solidarity among subjects of sexually, economically and racially oppressed social groups. The term "lovers" in the poem crosses the semantic boundaries of common usage and overflows into broader meanings: "lovers" are not only literal lovers, but "more generally anyone who opposes oppression and seeks to survive it" (Whitehead 1996: 78), with the hope of building a new social order. This idea, however, is not expressed through emphatic statements or propagandistic rhetoric, but is quietly suggested by "an utterly believable, vulnerable poetic voice" (Backus 1993: 816), that of the protagonist who is grieved by her failure to support another vulnerable individual. She knows that her testimony would be of no value in court: "an unemployed queer woman makes no witness at all […] what does she do and who is she married to?". The social vulnerability connecting a working-class queer woman and a black man is subtly signalled by the variation in the refrain, this time referred

to a collective subject: "our lovers teeth are white geese flying above us, but we ourselves are easily squished".

Another powerful re-signification, that of the word "indecency", occurs in the fourth section, entitled "A Mock Interrogation", the central part of the poem. A series of insistent questions are posed to the protagonist by a faceless interrogator, representing judicial, medical, religious and state authority – the voice of patriarchy and death – who condemns love between women as indecency and pathologises it as perversion. The questions "Have you ever held hands with a woman?" and "Have you kissed any women?" are answered in the affirmative ("Yes, many times") by the speaker who responds unexpectedly with a list of women who are hurt, in danger, or in need of assistance, "women who had been run over, beaten up. deserted. starved.", as well as women who were happy, dancing, climbing mountains, or "liked me better than anyone". Thus, the poet not only counteracts the pornographic connotation attributed to women's bodies by patriarchal authority, but also celebrates the idea of love as all-embracing solidarity.

Similarly, the following question of the accuser, who intends to shame her – "Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?" – is answered by the protagonist in such a way as to overturn the meaning of "indecency": the real indecency, claims the speaker, is the failure to act with love, letting women down. She enumerates her "acts of omissions": "I am guilty of not loving her who needed me", of not having the courage of fighting "for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love". The narrator further retorts:

> These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra.

Through this turn, as has been noted, Grahn "elevates the question from an accuser and an accused to a question that implicates the whole world" (Enszer 2017). Through the power of poetry, words like "lovers" and "indecent", as Adrienne Rich (1980: 251) remarked, "are forced to yield up new meanings". As the poem goes on, the tone of the speaker becomes even bolder: in section five she defiantly addresses Death, the personification of the forces of social oppression: "Death, do you tell me I cannot touch this woman?", with an emphasis that anticipates the apostrophe at the end of the poem. While the dominant tone of the poem is elegiac, combined with occasional parodic elements and bitter irony ("This woman is a lesbian, be careful"), in the conclusion the narrator subversively appropriates the fearless prophetic voice of the male literary and religious tradition (Backus 1993: 816). In the brief and intense final section, entitled "Hey you death", she not only talks directly to, but defiantly laughs at Death, affirming the power of "lovers" (in the expanded sense the term has acquired):

> to my lovers I bequeath
> the rest of my life
> I want nothing left of me for you, ho death
> except some fertilizer

for the next batch of us
who do not hold hands with you
who do not embrace you
who try not to work for you
or sacrifice themselves or trust
or believe you, ho ignorant
death, how do you know
we happened to you?
wherever our meat hangs on our own bones
for our own use
your pot is so empty
death, ho death
you shall be poor.

In this finale the speaker offers her testimony, invoking the life-affirming commitment to love and solidarity in opposition to the forces of social death: the "lovers" will defeat Death and they will envision an alternative social order, a world liberated from power and violence. The "topos of political transformation" (Rhodes 2005: 1) informing these final verses can be fully appreciated when read in the historical context of their production, at the peak of the women's liberation movement in the early 1970s: they are the expression of the driving force of the currents of radical feminism and lesbian feminism, with their belief in the possibility of a different, liberated world. *A Woman Is Talking To Death* is an outstanding example of the "textual performativity" (Rhodes 2005: 1) that characterised this revolutionary phase of feminism. As historian Alice Echols (2019: 243) remarks, after 1975 "cultural feminism eclipsed radical feminism as the dominant tendency within the women's liberation movement": the retreat into "a female culture" and the celebration of biological differences[6] accompanied the rejection of the most radical feminist political thinking on gender and on interlocking systems of oppression.

Judy Grahn's *A Woman Is Talking To Death*, which Adrienne Rich (1980: 251) described as "both a political poem and a love poem", is recognized as a milestone in the feminist poetry movement and is also an important document that sheds light on the early history of American feminism. As Honor Moore (2009: xxvii) has acutely observed: "with this poem, the whole political enterprise of feminism was subsumed by poetic means into an understanding of the complexity of the stark power relations that involve gender, race, and sexuality". It is not surprising that its poetic and political force continues to be relevant in the new millennium.

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[6] Judy Grahn seems to have subsequently embraced cultural feminism, as her 1993 book on menstruation suggests: *Blood, Bread and Roses. How Menstruation Created the World*. This is the only work by Grahn translated into Italian (Grahn 2020). To my knowledge, her lesbian feminist poetry remains untranslated in Italy.

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**Salvatore Marano**

# Becoming a Sound Poet. Paul Dutton's Poetry in Performance

**Abstract I:** Poeta e musicista di formazione jazz e blues, membro dei *Four Horsemen* e di CCMC di Michael Snow, *performer* vocale per R. Murray Schafer, nel suo lavoro di *sound poet* Dutton mette in scena l'identità scissa, plurale, del soggetto canadese. Nei testi per solo *performance*, costruisce la sua poesia sonora negli spazi interstiziali fra musica, linguistica e semantizzazione della voce, e mette alla prova i limiti del sistema fonatorio fra click, diplo- e triplofonie, versi animali, silenzio.

**Abstract II:** Poet and musician with a background in jazz and blues, member of *The Four Horsemen* and of Michael Snow's *CCMC*, and vocal performer for R. Murray Schafer, in his aural work Paul Dutton stages the split, plural linguistic identity of the Canadian subject. In texts for solo performance, he builds his sound poetry in the interstitial space between music, linguistics and the semantisation of the human voice, while locating his probe of the phonatory system in the realm of clicks, diplo- and triplophonies, animal verses, silence.

**Keywords:** sound poetry, performance, phonotext, polyglossia, pun, identity.

> S'il était possible d'imaginer une esthétique du
> plaisir textuel, il faudrait y inclure:
> "l'écriture à haute voix"
> (Barthes 1973: 88).

## 1. The Phonotext

With the notable exception of the introduction to the poet's selected poetry by Gary Barwin (2015), the best accounts of Paul Dutton's work are provided by the author himself. Thus, in the excellent prefatory note to *Right Hemisphere Left Ear*, a collection of texts in prose, verse, visually oriented or for vocal performance, a condensed manifesto of poetics greets the reader with zero degree of theoretical jargon and a fair amount of operating instructions:

> Poetry consists of language, and language consists of sound and sight, of idea and emotion, of intellect and body, of rationality and irrationality. It is my delight to explore all these elements of language and to incorporate them in my compositions. I am not in a camp. If an image seems to insist a visual expression I wish to allow it

> to take that form. […] Let's not imprison poetry on the page. Let's liberate it on the page. As music incorporates language […], let poetry incorporate music. As visual art incorporates language […], let poetry incorporate visual art. […]
> Some of my work best yields its effect through intellectual contemplation. Other of it through visual apprehension (I'm aware of the pun, but trust you'll be sympathetic). Still other of it through vocalization. Work with it, play with it, act on it. And most of all (ultimately, hopefully) enjoy it (Dutton 1979a: n. p.).

Keyword to this statement is *pleasure*, a notion semantically framed between the writers's "delight" of condensing emotions in formal constructs suitable to media other than print and the invitation to the audience to "enjoy" the traces of their presence scattered throughout the text. Between the lines of the principles guiding the author's approach to composition, the attentive reader can hardly miss that the interactive involvement required on her part addresses *le texte de jouissance* rather than *le texte de plaisir*, as Roland Barthes would have it; that is, "celui qui met en état de la perte, celui qui décomforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui). Fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage" (Barthes 1973: 23) as opposed to "celui qui contente, emplit, donne de l'euphorie; celui qui vient de la culture, ne rompt pas avec elle, est lié à une pratique comfortable de la lecture" (Barthes 1973: 22-23). Dutton's art is aimed at removing the audience from its comfort zone to the uncharted territories of "aureality", as per the title of one of his books of poetry, where genre, form, medium and channel are reconciled with the human voice. What is apparent in his "oral soundwork", some of which extends to "the outer reaches of the technical and expressive potential of human utterance", is eminently true also of those pieces written in "more conventional forms of literary expression, however unconventionally practised" (Rowley 2023).

Most of Dutton's writing stems from the principle that whatever appeals to sight is first and foremost part of the domain of hearing[1]. Consider "Eye" (Dutton 2015: 76), a composition from the "New Poems 1991-2014" section of his most recent publication, *Sonosyntactics*. From the start, what the title announces as a poem connected with vision turns out to be a textbook example of "phonotext", Stewart's category describing "that articulatory stream which the interruption of script at lexical borders never quite renders silent, at least within a single syntactic period broken by no full pauses" (Stewart 1990: 28). Starting with the oldest pun in the English language, that here is functional to identify the poem with the poet – both the narratological first person and the actual human being who translates his feelings into words

[1] Not all of it of course, but the notion of *continuum* is key to a better appreciation of his *modus operandi*: "First of all, my work doesn't in fact readily divide into 'sound performance and written': there are all kinds of gradations and overlaps. As well, there are plenty of similarities and differences *within* those two categories, not just *between* them: for one thing, I write print poems in no one style but throughout a wide range, including formal, free verse, minimal, narrative, with line breaks, run-on, found poems, etc. My sound poems range through a variety of styles as well. And then there are the visual poems, which are arguably as much drawn as they are written […]. I like to refer to the whole field of visual poetry as 'drawing with the alphabet'" (Nyman 2016). See Paul Dutton's official site: https://pduttonpoetry.wordpress.com (consulted on 27/07/2024).

– the acoustic potential of the lines makes its way to the reader through the sustained tension between alphabetic notation and "sonographic resonance" (Khan & Whitehead 1992: ix):

> Eye
>
> The eye of the poem is not my eye,
> its my not mine,
> nor my I its –
> if you see what I or it
> mean or means,
> whoever I am or is
> and whatever you mean or are,
> if you or I see whatever the poem means or is,
> if it is at all, or means
> whatever you think it means
> what it says
> what it means or sees,
> if it sees,
> if it says,
> if it is
> what you or I say it is,
> whoever you or I may be –
> I you or you me,
> the poem either or,
> the other me or you,
> who else would be or see
> what else could be
> the eye of the poem is us,
> and we its I
> (Dutton 2015: 76).

Whatever homograph or quasi heteronym catches the reader's sight has a counterpart both in the domain of homophony and in the polyphony of assonance and consonance. As a result, the polysemous nature of the composition as it appears on the page emerges from "endophony" (Stewart 1990: 28), the pragmatic action of silent speech, before the rational awareness of the elaborate turns of the syntax steps in. Caught in the plot of presence and absence, depending on whether we look at the text as a printed poem for the reader to enjoy or as a score for performance for the audience to attend, the interplay of visual and aural appreciation is expressed in the correspondence between the permutational dance of a limited number of letters on the page and the musical fugue or jazz improvisation on a narrow set of phonemes. In other words, the "idea of sonicity" (Khan 1992: 2) governing the logic of the poem takes place in the ear of Garrett's *silent speaker* before it is shaped in her brain, as if Dutton rephrased William Carlos Williams's famous formula as "no ideas but in *sounds*"[2].

[2] The famous line "Say it, no ideas but in things" opens the second stanza of "The Delineament of the Giants" (Williams 1963: 6).

"Eye" presents a variation on a theme that the author has been relentlessly exploring both in print and in sound poetry, at times by insisting on the same lexical hard core; most notably in "His Eyes, Her Eyes", a text conceived for vocalisation that was first published in *Right Emisphere Left Ear*[3] and subsequently recorded in the CD *Oralizations*. As part of the repertoire of the sound poet, the poem unlocks an orgy of sibilants in the colourful soundscape (Schafer 1977) created by the counterpoint of the vocal roundelay of the vowels and the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ – a favourite of Nichol, as per Dutton's sound poem "For the Letter That Begins Them All, H (for bp)[4]" – to which a barrage of plosives is added in the crackling opening stanza for maximum impact on the audience. The high rate of articulation, purposedly designed to saturate the acoustic space of performance, results in a controlled interference of the redundant signifier with the nuances of meaning conveyed by the intricate syntax through which the line of reasoning of the poem unfolds.

The resulting undermining of a crystal-clear argument and the blurring of the sense created by the saturation of the senses is so much part of the authorial strategy that one of Dutton's most emblematic phonotexts is entitled "Census" (Dutton 1979a: n.p.). The conflation of the inventory of the people inhabiting the here and now of the poetry reading – as Schechner (1988) would have it – and the sensory faculties at work in the live event is the mirror image of the clash between the graphematic activation of the etymological root of *sensus*[5] and the homophonic pun *census*/*senses*. In the incipit, dry and essential as the snap of two fingers, anagram and related strategies of letter substitution and word rearrangement literally translate into shifting graphematic sequences the verbal flow and rhythmic commutations of the spoken word, in which the active roles of author and audience, in tune with each other, make them as reversible as the shifters "you" and "me":

> you me
> five senses times two
> ten senses
> sense tenses
> sentences ...

The constant attention paid by the author to the inner voice of print poetry extends from lines conceived as sound poems, or later included in the program of a poetry reading, to verses created primarily for the page. An extremely effective example is provided by "Lies" (Dutton 1991a: 10), the magnificent poem that opens up a collection of writings

[3] The title of the section of the book devoted to sound poems in which "His Eyes, Her Eyes" appears is a phonotext in itself: "favourite strains re: frains", with a wordplay on *refrain* that is accomplished by reference to the obsolescent verb "frain" from Middle English *fraynen*, meaning "to ask" or maybe to the name "Frain" from the Gaelic *fraoch*, meaning "heather" given that Dutton is of Irish descent.

[4] Dutton (1991a: 52); the poem was subsequently recorded on the cassette tape *Full Throatle* and then on the compact disk *Oralizations*. Nichol loved the letter "h" so much that the editors of his 1994 reader titled it *An H in the Heart*.

[5] As in the stock phrase *sensus communis*, "held to unite the sensations of all senses in a general sensation or perception" according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sensus (consulted on 27/07/2024).

belonging more to the conceptual province of "aurature"[6] than, strictly speaking, to literature. Following an epigraph from the work of the Vancouver poet Gerry Gilbert, who significantly addresses the inner phonotextual quality of poetry ("there's something about a photograph that doesn't change & there's something about a poem which does"), and inaugurating "Statementalities", one of the various sections of the book anticipating the presence of music and voices ("Jazz", "Vocagraphics", "Double-Dutch Talk"), the poem is revealing for the contrast that it creates with its anchorage in the bookish tradition of modernist intertextuality and for the biographical resonances that it contains:

> Lies
> *for John Newlove*
>
> The lies we tell
> are not the lies we think we tell,
> deceiving, most of all, ourselves:
> not so much uttering lies
> as acting on utter lies
> unuttered.

The dedication to John Newlowe, the Saskatchewan poet based in Ontario who in 1972 won the prestigious Governor General's Award for *Lies* (1972), explains both the title and the unique status of the poem, which is at the same time a creative effort, a condensed review, a critical appreciation and a homage to a fellow poet who was former senior editor for McClelland & Steward, the publishing house where Dutton himself worked as copywriter in the Seventies[7]. A canonical sestina, or rather a double tercet variating on Dante's terza rima through a rhyme scheme, resulting from the repetition of the keywords "tell" and "lies", more appropriate to the meditative tone of the text (AAbCCd), locates "Lies" in a sophisticated chiasm of correspondences. On the one hand, its prosody reflects the remarkable control of the poetic line that Newlove derived from his Modernist masters, whose subtle movements of the syntax are better appreciated when experienced as visible traces of inscription; on the other, the prominence of a keyword coming from orality such as "tell" in the first half of the stanza and the sudden piling up of three derivatives from *utterance* in the second ("uttering", "utter", "unuttered") conjure up a force field of opposing stances where fiction – the conventional tenor of the metaphor of the lie in literature – is evoked in the suspended animation of the phonotext. The possibility offered by literature to turn deception into art, as per Newlove's poetics in tune with the symbolist idea that

[6] John Cayley's category is appropriate here, although, strictly speaking, it refers to the future regime of literature after the advent of electronics: "The grammatization of linguistic aurality – enabling indexed access and archive – will, for example, offer our cultures the potential to shift the central focus of its most significant and affective linguistic practice from literature to aurature, not 'back' but 'forward' to the support medium for language to which human animals are genetically predisposed" (Cayley 2018: x).

[7] Dutton was copywriter at McClelland & Stewart between 1971 and 1978, https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/dutton-paul-1943-four-horsemen (consulted on 27/07/2024).

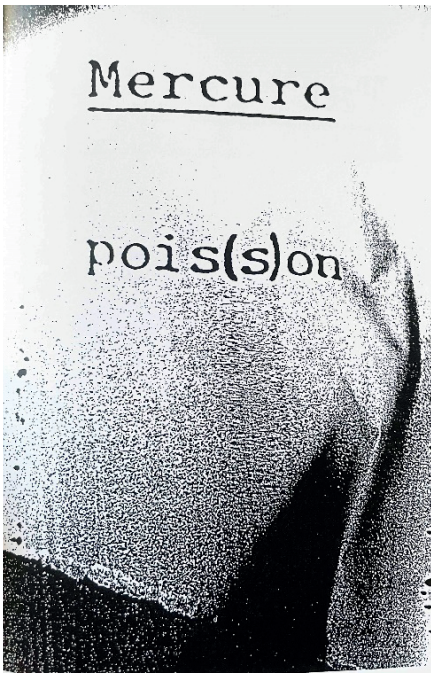
the supreme fiction points at the ultimate truth, is cast by Dutton against the portrait of the everyday life effects of mendacity on both personal relationships and the inner balance of the I systematically unsettled by the illusion of self-deception. The coexistence in the two halves of the poem of both visions is rooted in the human language, which makes lies and fiction equally possible, and whose ultimate reality sends the reader back to the voice, that ineradicable bodily presence looming as the constant fixed residue in the Gutenbergean world of paper and ink.

**2. The Cycle of Sight and Sound**

Dutton's practice of pure visual poetry, although extremely original, occupies a minor part of his work. Among the various explorations of the page as canvas with different tools of inscription – from the typographic and calligraphic poems where the words are variously arranged on the scriptural space, to the use of glyphs and the exploitation of the typewriter – *Partial Additives* (1994), a collection of minimalist poems on the serendipity of the secret life of the letters, stands out for the phonotextual qualities that highlight the conventional nature of language within the witty frame of understated humour. Like many of his most successful ventures, such as the role played in the sound poetry quartet *The Four Horsemen* (with bpNichol, Steve McCaffery and Rafael Barreto-Rivera) and the participation in the total improvisation band CCMC, featuring the late Michael Snow, where Dutton plays the harmonica and practices his radical "oral soundwork" with the human voice, the book is the result of a collaboration. An advanced and more comprehensive version of an earlier typewriter poetry collection, *Additives* (1988), the 1994 edition published by Writers Forum owes its visual magic to the xerox machine of Bob Cobbing, himself a formidable poet in the tradition of visual and sound art and a leading member of the British Poetry Revival of the 1970s. With a clever use of the brackets, words differing for one letter or, in the case of the so-called "Compound Additives", two or three are yoked together under titles chosen in such a way as to widen the semantic space of the poem to its further limits. In accordance with Dutton's idea that poetry exists as an event in motion – like life, Wallace Stevens would say – the book is defined in the Author's Note as "a work in progress" and the procedure employed in devising each poem is described as follows:

> An additive is a substance that, when added in small quantities to another substance, changes that second substance into a third one. The additives in *The Additives* are the letters of the alphabet. I use the term also to refer to the individual poems; hence the title of this book, which constitutes a selection from the present body of such poems (Dutton 1994b: n.p.).

Among the inventive reworkings of one-liners such as "Reverberations" whose text – a phonotext of phonotexts, since the field of existence of all the poems that appears in the collection is located in the same interstitial space of Roman Jakobson's minimal pairs – is reproduced as a reverberative icon, the one that stands out is "Mercure", a stunning early achievement and a long-lasting presence in Dutton's repertoire till today. In Cobbing's magnificent rendition, it reads (Dutton 1994b: n. p.):




In a more advanced form than the one chosen for the opening poem in French – the visually centred, self-referential "Imprimerie" reading "enc(o)re" (Dutton 1994b: n. p.) – "Mercure" creates a polyglot semantic space by combining the two official languages of Canada in all the possible morphemic permutations of title and text into a hybrid Franglish koiné. The creation of *poisson* via the addition of the "s" to *poison*, one of the semes of mercury, a heavy metal that is lethal in case of prolonged exposure to it, retroacts on the title, now breakable down into *mer* ("the sea") and *cure* ("care" and/or "therapy" in both languages), according to a procedure reminiscent of the homophonic translations of the Toronto Research Group (bpNichol and Steve McCaffery) and those of *Six Fillious*, a Fluxus happening in which Dutton took part at the Ear Inn in New York in 1979[8]. In like fashion, any *lector in fabula* who is willing to play the poet's game can easily picture for herself an ecocritical scenario whereby a *cure* is required for the poisoning of the *sea* following the illegal spills of *mercury*, as it happened between 1932 and 1968 in Minamata Bay, where the criminal actions of the Chisso Chemical Corporation contaminated molluscs, crustaceans, fishes and, at the top of the food chain, an entire population. Besides, either the reader looks at the etymological origin of the letter "S" in the Egyptian hyeroglyph for "tooth" or chooses Kipling's fictional version of "How the Alphabet Was Made" (1902) in which the letter "S" is said to derive from the drawing of a snake – case in point, a sea snake or, better, the snake-like American eel – the powerful imagery associated with the additive generates an extra figurative layer in the already elaborate iconism of the visual poem.

If the above were the only semantic expansions of the poem, "Mercure" as such would be

[8] On the TRG, see Marano (2017). A recording of the *Six Fillious* reading (February 7, 1979) is available at PennSound: https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Six-Fillious.php (consulted on 27/07/2024).

a major accomplishment and a noteworthy addition (it is worth saying) to the author's lifelong concerns for ethnic and ecological questions, both cemented by his collaboration with composer and environmental activist Raymond Murray Schafer, once as a theatrical performer (in the pageant *Apocalypse*) and, more crucially, a second time as the creator of the vocal treatment for "Wolf Chant", a song from Schafer's magnum opus *Patria* (1966-2021), which Dutton recorded in *Full Throatle*[9]. Especially in this sound poem, reissued in *Oralizations*, the performer pushes the boundaries of his voice beyond the Katajjaq of the Inuits by reproducing with impressive mimetism and emotional power the barks and the howls of an animal that, once glorious in its fearful majesty but today at risk of extinction, is still sacred to all Native Americans.

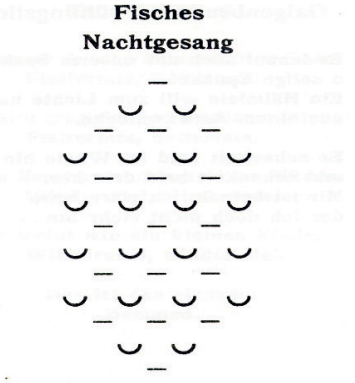
It just so happens that "Mercure" is more than that, not only as one of a limited set of Dutton's poems whose records of its "alphabetic, grammaphonic, and live" (Bernstein 2009: 142) versions are documented, but also as a text that, after the success enjoyed by its performed version, has twice undergone remediation (Bolter & Grusin 1999) in its written form, according to different "contexts of readership" (Bernstein 1998: 8) and on the ground of the different functions accomplished in an editorial collective work and in an authorial selection of texts. As a sound poem, both in the self-released cassette *Full Throatle* and in the CD *Oralizations*, the script is expanded in order to free the full potential of the bilingual phonotext. Repurposed as richly articulated performance, according to the principle that "[p]erformance always exceeds script, just as text always outperforms audibility" (Bernstein 2009: 148), the sound poem lasts six minutes and forty-eight seconds, which in live versions easily exceeds seven minutes, as documented in the live recorded session at the *Word Aloud 6 Spoken Word Festival* in Durham, Ontario of November 2009, accessible on Youtube[10].

Performed by the author, "Mercure" brings the process of breaking down the words into progressively minimal components to its extreme consequences. All traces of textuality are pulverised in the invocation of "aural, sonic, musical and preguttural metaphors at the points where they are unable to speak, at the limits of language" (Khan 1992: 4), before the exhilarating process of total liberation of the voice brings back the text anew. By tentatively approaching the first letter of "poi(s)son," the performance starts with a low volume click, the repeated voiceless bilabial sound mimicking the production of air bubbles; the same attributable to an imaginary ichthyologos, should fishes talk, whose notational symbol of void and emptiness is reflected in the second letter of the poem, the "o" itself a graphic double of the digit "0" that is "zero". In turn, the reiterated accumulation of the click aimed at evoking a burst of bubbles has a typographic counterpart on the cover of *Sonosyntactics*, the book containing Dutton's selected poems in which "Mercure" appears in a two-part, second-degree remediation as both poem and self-referential script of itself containing the instructions for its performance. The elegant cover of the selected poems is a computer-

[9] In this important song, human and animal voices intentionally mingle. The first sound uttered by the poet is "A" suggesting the beginning of the alphabet despite the fact that the singer is supposedly a subject of primary orality culture. Note also that "Echo of wolf-howl/(wolf howl)/(howl)" is the fourth and final movement of Dutton's "Banff Suite" (Dutton 1991a: 22).

[10] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCaCHyj4ozk (consulted on 16/05/24). Regarding recorded live events, see Auslander (2008).

processed colour rendition of a page from *The Plastic Typewriter*, Dutton's typewriter artwork whose bubble-like signs were originally produced by the strokes of lowercase "o", a sign also used for "0" in the minimalist keyboard of the Sears Roebuck Young Students Typewriter employed by the author. For the reader who connects "Mercure" to the modern tradition of historical avant-gardes, the live enactment of the poem creates a bridge with the graphic forerunner of Dutton's *additive*, Christan Morgenstern's proto concrete poem "Fisches Nachtgesang" (Morgenstern 1905: 25), whose diacritic signs in place of words or letters, make it appear more as a score than as a text:




While the performance is under way, Dutton's "probing of the limits of intelligibility and referentiality" (Perloff 2009: 98) through the technical mastery of vocalisation and overtone singing offers an immersive experience into the soundscape of the live event which eventually reconciles the audience with the open-endedness of language embedded in the printed poem. Whereas a reader looks for linguistic tools to unlock the semantic potential of deferred orality, a member of the audience fully appreciates the pragmatics of presence, since the live actualisation of a text works against the grain of prosody and is able to show the true colours of the phonotext. Equally, whereas a reader looks for meaning in free and bound morphemes, a member of the audience learns how to exploit the serendipity of the paragram the way the author did, by finding words within words, in the epiphanic combinations of the sounds buried within the phonotext. As a result, *poi(s)son* can be pronounced as if it were a compound of "pois" and "son" a synthetic portmanteau in Franglish where the eye (*pois*, "dots") and the ear (*son*, "sound") coexist in their phonological articulation, respectively, as *pwah* (i.e. *pha*, "yuck!") and *son* (both "sound" and "offspring").

The circular process of remediation from text to performance to text, first for didactic purposes, then for conceptual reasons[11], opens up new hermeneutic scenarios, in which the

[11] First for the print resource to *Spoken Word Poetry* in 2014, then for his own selected poetry publication. Note the difference of register between an instruction manual: "'Mercure' (mercury) is performed by using special vocal effects on the phonemes (units of speech-sound) of the French word poison [*sic*] (poison) [...]" (Wilson 2014: 40) and a publication addressing a University audience, "The performance of 'Mercure', comprises an ornamental sequential buildup of the phonemes of the French word poisson […]" (Dutton 2015: 70).

biocentric context of the ecocritical poem reveals a more intimate biographic moment[12]. If a son needs a mother, and if onomatopoeic interjection suggests language in formation, the mother/son complex evoked by the phonotext – *mère*, the phantasmatic presence brought to the son by sound (*son*) – displaces the *cure* as "care" and depicts the son as a child. Hence, the unexpected picture of the caring mother in her 1950s polka dot dress (*robe à pois*) who, having taken the temperature of his feverish son with a mercury thermometer, administers a disgusting medicine (cod liver oil? *Pwah*!)[13]. Beyond the stereotyped gender role in which the woman is cast, or the instant total recall of a typical childhood memory for a person of Dutton's generation – he was born in 1943 – the literary resonances of the scene that has just been evoked extends beyond the page to the stage and, potentially, to the semantic *encyclopedia* of knowledge (Eco 1984) mastered by the poet and the audience. In *Partial Additives*, the only occurrence of a fatherly figure is in the classical Oedipal scene hinted at in "Patricide" whose text reads: "d(e)ad" (Dutton 1994b: n. p.). However, if we think that the kid is evoked by the French word for "sound" through the flickering signifier *son* between voiced and voicelessness, as in Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1970), we can as well ask ourselves whether Derrida would read the *cure* in "Mercure" the way he does with Plato's *Phaedrus*, as an instance of the

> […] *pharmakon*. This "medicine", this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternatively or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent (Derrida 1981: 70).

The contiguity of the performed version of "Mercure" with the deconstructionist reading of a dialogue supporting the superiority of orality over literacy extends to the ambivalence of the poem. From print to sound poetry, "Mercure" oscillates in mercurial fashion between sight and sound, private regression to primal scene and public development of the authorial self. By evoking Hermes, the title highlights the performative potential of a poem whose proper context is the hermetic tradition of poetry as riddle[14]. Chances are that, had it been composed in the 1990s, "Mercure" would have been published by Mercury Press, the Ontario publishing house that one year after its foundation issued Dutton's *Visionary Portraits* (1991b). At one time a concrete minimalist ecopoem and a "paleotechnic"

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[12] On the biocentric, anti-anthropocentric qualities of ecopoetry, see Glotfelty & Fromm (1996) and Berdinesen (2018).

[13] "In my preschool years, when I got pissed off about something, I'd stomp up the stairs, blistering the air with the foulest language I knew: 'Darn it! Rats! Brats! Stinkers and Bums!' That, at any rate, is how I have always remembered it, but my eldest sister recently insisted, quite adamantly, that what I shouted was, 'Darn it! Rats! Brats! Bums and Stinkers!' And that has made me wonder if I perhaps reconstructed, from abiding family lore, my personal memory of my oft-repeated display of pique, complete with a mental image of my miniature self pounding up the staircase. Whether the memory I hold is truly mine or borrowed from accounts heard from family members, it's clear that, somewhere along the way, I exercised a bit of aesthetic initiative, reversing the last two terms to create a skippier cadence" (Nyman 2016).

[14] Dutton's poetry collection *The Book of Numbers* (1979), to mention a blatant example, is a sustained riddle from start to finish.

(McCaffery 1998: 168) sound poem where lallation meets the advanced exploration of the human voice in the avant-garde tradition of Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters – and, in musical terms, of Luigi Russolo and John Cage – "Mercure" brings to the surface not so much the "unheard melodies" as the dissonances of the "graphonic tension" (Stewart 1990: 145-191) in a poem in Franglais. In so doing, it unveils its ultimate glocal vocation, whereby the archetypal frame of the Earth Mother guards at its core the linguistic trademark of Canadian identity. A Derridean "trace" illustrating the play of *différance* and a valuable addition (an *additive*?) to Charles Bernstein's idea that

> there is often no one original written version of a poem. Even leaving aside the status of the manuscript, there often exist various and discrepant printings. I should like to say textual performances – in magazines and books, with changes in wording but also in spacing, font, paper, and, moreover, contexts of readership; making for a plurality of versions, none of which can claim sole authority. I would call these multifoliate versions performances of the poem; and I would add the poet's own performance of the work in a poetry reading, or readings, to the list of the variants that together, plurally, constitute and reconstitute the work (Bernstein 1998: 8).

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**Giovanna Buonanno**

# From Page to Stage: Tanika Gupta's Theatre Adaptation of Jackie Kay's Memoir *Red Dust Road*

**Abstract I:** L'adattamento teatrale dell'autobiografia di Jackie Kay dal titolo *Red Dust Road* (2010), realizzato da Tanika Gupta, ha debuttato al Festival internazionale di Edimburgo nel 2019. La pièce mette in scena la ricerca dell'identità di Kay, figlia naturale di una donna scozzese delle Highlands e di uno studente nigeriano e adottata da una coppia di Glasgow nei primi anni Sessanta. L'articolo si concentra sulle strategie utilizzate da Gupta nella sua riscrittura: inserendo brani dell'opera poetica di Kay, Gupta rende un commovente omaggio alla poetessa, una delle voci più potenti della scrittura femminile nera britannica.

**Abstract II:** The stage adaptation of Jackie Kay's 2010 memoir *Red Dust Road* written by playwright Tanika Gupta premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2019. The play dramatises Kay's identity quest as a mixed-race child, born to a Scottish woman from the Highlands and a Nigerian student, and adopted as a baby by a Glaswegian couple in the early 1960s. The article will focus on the strategies Gupta deploys in her rewriting and argue that by incorporating passages from Kay's poetic *oeuvre*, Gupta pays a moving tribute to Kay, one of the most powerful voices in black British women's writing.

**Keywords:** Tanika Gupta, adaptation, Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road*, Black and Asian British women's writing.

## 1. Introduction

Playwright Tanika Gupta has been at the forefront of the British theatre scene for over three decades, producing a sizeable body of original plays, as well as adaptations of both classic and contemporary literary works. As a British writer of Bengali heritage, shaped by her origins, but not "bound" by them (Sierz 2012: 15), Gupta has dealt with British colonial history and the enduring legacy of colonialism in contemporary, post-imperial Britain, in both her original works and in her rewriting of existing works. Adaptations have increasingly become a key component of Gupta's writing for the stage and offer compelling illustrations of the playwright's "innovative use of the past to comment on the globalised present" (Schlote & Buonanno 2022: 263), when she revisits canonical works in the European canon, ranging from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Along with the rewriting of classic works, Gupta has also transferred onto the stage narratives written by contemporary women writers who, over the last decades

have drawn the contours of multicultural Britain in literature. These include the coming-of-age novel *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal, the comic novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka and the work that will be discussed in this essay, Jackie Kay's memoir *Red Dust Road*.

Despite consistently questioning ethnic pigeonholing and the label of "Asian" writer (Gardner 2006), Gupta has also been 'inevitably' drawn to confronting her bicultural background, as she explains in an interview she released in 1997 (Stephenson & Langdridge 1997). The playwright has expressed her uneasiness at having to write about being "torn between two cultures", which she considers to be an "outdated and boring issue"; however, she seems aware that her writing revolves around "trying to get that character to search out their roots" and the resulting work is admittedly about "confusion and identity crisis" (Stephenson & Langdridge 1997: 117). Hence, adapting Jackie Kay's memoir *Red Dust Road* for the theatre taps into Gupta's long-standing commitment to exploring issues of identity formation in contested cultural terrains: *Red Dust Road*, first published in 2010, chronicles Kay's long and painstaking process of tracing her birth parents and consequently recomposing the multiple biological and cultural strands of herself, as the mixed-race, adoptive daughter of a Scottish couple, growing up in Glasgow in the 1960s. Gupta's adaptation dramatises Kay's identity quest and expands the performative potential of life-writing by strengthening the dialogic/discursive quality of the text, its polyphony and variety of registers, while also bringing into focus the significance of tracing both "individual and communal" genealogies in black and Asian British writing, through the act of remediation and retrieval (Döring 2020: 468).

**2. Between Text and Performance: Black and Asian British Women's Writing across Genres and Media**

Both Gupta and Kay have significantly contributed to shaping the burgeoning field of black and Asian British writing. They gradually matured as writers in the evolving multicultural literary and theatrical scene of the 1980s and 1990s, a thriving, creative environment enriched by newly founded women's writing collectives, whose aim was to support women writers of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian descent and challenge their exclusion from literature and the arts. As film director Pratibha Parmar states, reflecting on the predicament of the "outsiders within", namely women of minority background, "representations are a critical component of our identities, particularly for those of us who are perceived to be on the margins of the mainstream, the malestream, and the whitestream. Our need for reflections of ourselves and our communities is pivotal to our survival" (1991: 18). In the 1980s and 1990s the need for representation favoured forms of collaborative work and intense experimenting across genres and media, which also offered "a matrilineal alternative" to the predominantly male line (Rastogi 2016: 77). This pioneering phase, despite being also the result of what Gupta calls "token gesturing" (AI Profile 2021) on the part of cultural institutions that were opening up new avenues to writers of minority background, succeeded nonetheless in nurturing the talent of young writers who obtained appointments at prominent theatrical institutions, such as the Royal Court or the Tricycle, or, like Gupta, were commissioned works by the BBC.

In the early stages of their careers, both Gupta and Kay worked across various media and genres, as Gupta produced playscripts for the theatre as well as radio dramas, while Kay cooperated with *Theatre of Black Women*, the first black women's theatre company in Britain. Her debut theatre piece for the company, entitled *Chiaroscuro* (1986) is an experimental *choreopoem*, a fusion of drama and poetry with scenes arranged in non-linear sequences and contains in essence many of the thematic and formal features of Kay's work, as it explores the racial and sexual identity of four female characters of diverse backgrounds by mixing story-telling and poetic language. As has been noted, Kay's writing "reject[s] easy platitudes and challenge[s] readers to reject normative ideas of racial, sexual, and national identity" (Paddy 2002), while often drawing on her personal experience of transracial adoption that has marked her "as doubly different" (Weedon 2016: 51). Arguably, Gupta's choice to remediate Kay's memoir, which also partly recollects the ground-breaking phase of the 1980s and 1990s, is a tribute to this formative period and to Kay's and Gupta's respective coming to voice as British black and Asian writers.

### 3. Writing the Hybrid Self in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*

In *Red Dust Road* Kay creates a complex, sophisticated non-linear narrative moving across time and place to weave into her memoir the complexity of her origins. The titular red dust road that leads her to her birth father's village in Nigeria symbolises her African heritage, but is only one of the several influences in her life. In her work Kay details the complex entanglement of routes and roots that have shaped her identity as a mixed-race child, born to a Scottish woman from the Highlands and a Nigerian student, and adopted as a baby by a Communist working-class, Glaswegian couple in the early 1960s. As has been pointed out, autobiographical writings have stood out as important vehicles to convey the tension between belonging and exclusion in black and Asian women's writing and have assisted women in writing their way "into the narrative of British history" (Laursen 2020: 499). As Kay argues in *Red Dust Road*: "It is not so much that being black in a white country means that people don't accept you as, say, Scottish; it is that being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself" (Kay 2010: 38-39). The self-reflexive genre is, therefore, a most apt vehicle to delve into herself, while simultaneously raising questions of cultural, racial and national belonging in Britain.

In Kay's other works, such as the aforementioned play *Chiaroscuro*, the identity quest is pursued through a mixture of genres and by foregrounding female experiences. Carla Rodríguez González points out that "Kay's literary identities are always intertextual and relational. Her characters and voices develop empowering strategies to fill in the gaps of a fragmented cultural memory" (2015: 104). *Red Dust Road* also relies on "empowering strategies" Rodríguez González mentions, as it consists of many fragments and snapshots of Kay's life, while it also chronicles her various journeys to meet her biological parents: the book opens in a hotel room in Abuja and describes Jackie's first meeting with her birth-father, Jonathan, but recounts also her first, much anticipated encounter with her birth-mother, Elizabeth, in a hotel reception hall in Milton Keynes, England, after many delays and cancellations. These awkward encounters with her birth parents, dotted with silences and surreal conversations, are humorously contrasted with Jackie's childhood fantasy about

them, when she imagined her mother "was Shirley Bassey", only to be disappointed when she found out that she was a "white nurse from the Highlands" (Kay 2010: 65), or that her father could be a young Sidney Poitier or Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, "the only real images of black men" at her disposal (Kay 2010: 36).

The chapters detailing the meetings with her parents or her trips to Nigeria are interspersed with Jackie's own memories of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s as the daughter of John and Helen, a white Glaswegian couple who had adopted her and her brother Maxwell. The couple also had a migratory background, as they had originally met in New Zealand, where they had relocated as economic migrants, before settling back in Glasgow. Consequently, the memoir reads as a mosaic of her family life across time and multiple locations. By piecing together fragments of her life, Kay retraces her hybrid self and this existential trait becomes a signature of her memoir, as she conveys onto the page the investigation of her origins by creating a varied, hybrid text. She assembles multiple textual materials such as letters, emails, or chapters written in the style of diary entries that are often introduced by a reference to the year in which the events took place. They recount significant experiences as she comes of age, or document her feeling of exclusion because of her colour or uncertain origins and are vividly rendered in Gupta's stage version, as will be shown in the next section of this article.

As John McLeod has noted, the text's design recalls the form of *The Adoption Papers,* Kay's debut long poem published in 1991, in which she also uses different typesets, along with a variety of registers in order to differentiate the three female voices that compose the poem (2015: 211). This earlier work ultimately reads as an ideal companion piece to *Red Dust Road*: couched in poetic form, *The Adoption Papers* emotionally expresses the process of adoption from the perspective of three women, as Kay interlaces the poetic voices of a daughter, a birth mother, and an adoptive mother, thus placing biological parentage on a par with cultural parentage and countering the commonly held view of the family as regulated by biological lines. The importance of cultural affiliations is resumed by Kay in *Red Dust Road* and reinforced by Gupta in her adaptation in which she brings to the fore the tension between filiative and affiliative relationships, as she dramatises Kay's complex web of cultural and biological life-lines, by inserting in the stage version passages from *The Adoption Papers* and intersecting them with scenes from the memoir.

### 4. "…nature, nurture, genes, porridge": Family Trees and Female Genealogies in Tanika Gupta's *Red Dust Road*

The cover of the 2019 Oberon edition of Gupta's stage adaptation of *Red Dust Road* shows Sasha Frost, the actress who plays Jackie Kay in the theatre production of the play, sitting next to Elaine C. Smith, who plays Helen, Jackie's adoptive mother, signalling that the adaptation foregrounds family relationships and ties that are only partly reflected in the title: Kay's search of her birth parents evoked by the image of the red dust road is only one of the multiple paths traced in the story. In keeping with the source text, the fraught and awkward connection with Jonathan, Kay's Nigerian father, functions as a catalyst in the play and takes Jackie to Nigeria in two separate trips: one, in the opening scenes of both Act 1 and Act 2 and set in a hotel room in Abuja, where she meets Jonathan for the first time, and

the other towards the end of the play when she spends time in Lagos and manages to track down one of her half-siblings. Hence, finding her birth father and reclaiming her African heritage ideally frames the play, while also representing Jackie's trans-local routes which are juxtaposed with her family life in Scotland.

An additional clue to Gupta's reworking of Kay's memoir is the dedication placed at the beginning of the volume: to "all our mums, but especially to: Gairika Gupta, Monica Elizabeth Walton, and Helen Kay" (Gupta 2019: n. p.). The tribute to mothers (including Gupta's own mother) prioritises female genealogies which feature prominently in the play, in which defining passages from the memoir are selected and turned into dense and humorous dialogues that help to convey Jackie's search for her identity. In this endeavour she is often assisted by other women, ranging from her adoptive mother who is, as shown on the cover of the printed version, a constant and reassuring presence in Jackie's life, to her female friends and even include the writer Chimamanda Adichie who makes a cameo appearance in one of the final scenes set in Lagos, when both she and Kay, as prominent writers of African descent, are taking part in a literary event. As Suzanne Scafe has argued, women's autobiographies are relational, and this quality is further emphasised when rendered in the dialogic form of the play, compared to the narrative form of life-writing (Scafe 2016: 150).

Gupta states that she intended to keep both the fragmented structure of the memoir and the non-chronological order of the events recounted, but she was equally keen to add a more lyrical and poetic strand to the adaptation, as a way to make Kay's compelling poetic voice resonate more clearly. To this end, she resorts to inserting in the play extracts from *The Adoption Papers* which are indicated by the use of italics, whose function is to add a more intimate, individual female voice and break the sequence of dialogues. Hence, the intertextual links amplify Kay's poetic presence in the play, while further illustrating the significance of female ties and influences in shaping one's identity. For instance, in one of the scenes based on *The Adoption Papers*, a sixteen-year-old Jackie kisses a poster of Angela Davis hanging in her room and significantly affirms that "Angela Davis is the only female person I've seen (except for a nurse on TV) who looks like me. She had big hair like mine that grows out instead of down. My mum says it's called an Afro" (Gupta 2019: n. p.). The choice of this passage is a reminder of the limited range of images a mixed-race Scottish girl growing up in the 1960s and 1970s could reflect herself in (a nurse on TV or Angela Davis). It prefigures Kay's commitment to tracing black female genealogies later in the play, when Jackie alludes to the impact of key black literary figures, such as Audre Lorde or Toni Morrison, whose famous quote "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it", aptly crops up in a conversation between Jackie and her black female friends (Gupta 2019: n. p.).

Several of the play's scenes take place in the adoptive family home, seamlessly moving between past and present. They poignantly dramatise Jackie's coming of age and her gradual confrontation with society's views on race, gender and transracial adoption. In each scene the stage directions indicate Jackie's age and highlight different moments of her life that are crucial in sharpening her awareness of her colour, when, for instance, aged 7, she incites her brother Maxwell to side for the Indians as they watch a cowboys and Indians film: "JACKIE: I wanted the Injuns to win. MAXWELL: Don't be daft. Injuns are the enemy. JACKIE: Same

colour as me. Same colour as you of. Look" (Gupta 2019: n. p.). Similarly, Jackie's encounter with racist bullies at 10 years of age, is also vividly re-enacted:

> BULLY 1: Whit dae ye call a darkie falling from a mountain? Chocolate drop! The BULLIES laugh uproariously at their own jokes. JACKIE kicks one of them hard. One BULLY jumps on JACKIE whilst the other one tries to stuff bits of grass and mud into her mouth. BULLY 1: That's what you should eat, mud, because you're from a mud hut. BULLY 2: Sambo! Sambo! BULLY 1: Dirty darkie. Why don't you go back to your own country? (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

The harshness Jackie faces in society at large is countered by the warmth and love of her family and the homely microcosm also strengthens Jackie's Scottish identity. In Gupta's adaptation this is conveyed through frequent insertion of songs and poetry belonging to Scottish folklore and literary tradition and culminates in a humorous rendition of Robert Burns's *Address to a Haggis* (1786), "Great chieftain o the puddin'-race", jointly delivered by Jackie and her father John (Gupta 2019: n. p.).

Additionally, the supportive role assigned to the family, especially in the earlier stages of Jackie's life, extends to the community she becomes part of when she starts attending university in the late 1970s. Even if violent and discriminatory racist acts continue to haunt her, the communal context is conducive to gradually build resistance, as this scene shows:

> JACKIE finally feels part of the group. She sits with two black women, AJ and CLAIRE. AJ: Black women are not just oppressed because we are women, we are oppressed because we are black women. White women on the other hand, continue to be complicit in racism. CLAIRE: They put up posters of you around the university? JACKIE: Mine and Alastair's. He was called a 'poof' and I was called an Irish Catholic wog and a degenerate ugly feminist. […] They even put razor blades behind the posters for anyone who tried to rip them down (Gupta 2019: n. p.).

The formative years at university also signal Jackie's gradual exploration of identity politics, facilitated by fledgling black feminist collectives, that encouraged women of colour to fight oppression through activism and community organizing, while also playing a key role in the setting up of black women's writing collectives in the 1980s:

> RHONA enters and hands a leaflet to JACKIE. RHONA: There's going to be a meeting in London of a group called OWAAD. You should go. You'd get a lot out of it. JACKIE: OWAAD? RHONA: Organisation of Women of African and Asian descent. JACKIE: You think I should go? RHONA: Er…yes! (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

Jackie's need to trace her ancestry is then also linked to her ongoing fight against both casual and systemic racism and her determination to counter stereotyping in order to acquire a more rounded sense of herself, as the following extract suggests:

> JACKIE: I want to know what makes me who I am – nature, nurture, genes, porridge…

> CLAIRE: And your black Nigerian side that no one ever talked to you about. AJ: I get that. We're constantly having to come up with versions of ourselves to fit in with our environment. CLAIRE: We are all children of empire. (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

Consequently, Kay's appropriation of her African heritage is part of a personal trajectory that intersects with British colonial and postcolonial history and is gradually woven into the adaptation: walking the red dust road enhances the play's polyvocal quality and infuses it with a ritualistic mode. If, on the one hand, the Scottish context is constantly evoked as a homely setting and conveys the idea of nuclear family unit, the Nigerian lineage is polyphonic and plural and places Jackie in a large web of familial relations, also revealed through chants and ceremonies, as in one of the final scenes of the play which is set in her father's village:

> A very old woman – NWANYIAFOR OSHIEKWE – sits on a chair. JACKIE and KACHI bend down as she blesses her. Another man enters with the Kola nuts and the blessing takes place. NWANYIAFOR: I will bless you and welcome you to this land. Onye wetara Oji Wetara Ndu (He who brings Kola brings life) She sprinkles some dust on JACKIE's head. KACHI: She is blessing you with clay dust from the river. The blessing is long and elaborate and ends with 'Ise' Amen. JACKIE takes the Kola nut. JACKIE: Ise. NWANYIAFOR: Isaayyy… God the Creator of the earth and everything there. […]. We welcome Jackie Kay to Nigeria. Thank you, O God Almighty, Chukwu Okike, for bringing her here safely. She has crossed the waters (Gupta 2019: n.p.).

The theatre production of the play, directed by Dawn Walton, enriched the script with music that effectively rendered Jackie's multiple cultural influences: as one reviewer suggested, "the use of authentic African instruments and traditional Scottish lullabies" succeeded in conveying "the deeply rich and cultured life of Jackie Kay" (Kanjira 2019). Similarly, the stage design suggestively visualised the play's overarching concern with finding one's roots, as an imposing golden-brown frame "morphing into a knotty trunk" (Fisher 2019) created a family tree that "was symbolic of Jackie's mixed heritage – which is one of western influences and one of tribal and traditional cultures" (Kanjira 2019).

The National Theatre of Scotland produced the play in co-production with Manchester HOME, Manchester's centre for international contemporary culture and the show, after its premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2019, toured Glasgow and Manchester. This choice of venues further exemplifies the significance of the adaptation as a tribute to Kay's luminous career, given the centrality of both cities in Kay's life, who was the Scottish *Makar*, the national poet laureate of Scotland from 2016 to 2021 and also a long-time resident in Manchester.

**5. Conclusion**

The play's final scene is set in the Scottish family home, as Jackie shares with her parents and her brother her new knowledge of her African lineage, after she has been to Africa, "a million miles away from Glasgow, from my lovely Fintry Hills", where she had equally

felt "at home" (Gupta 2019: n.p.). Her African journeys have expanded her biological and transcultural roots, but the end of the play brings her back home to Scotland, in a final feisty moment of songs and dance where the adoptive family movingly celebrates their daughter's appropriation of her biological roots.

In conclusion, Gupta's adaptation has provided a theatrical afterlife to Kay's memoir, thus significantly contributing to consolidating a Black and Asian British women's writing tradition, that through transmedial and intertextual strategies favours legacy and canon formation (Buonanno 2022: 355). The intertextual strategies deployed by Gupta have reinforced the poetic quality of the text and enhanced the discursive value of life-writing, ultimately producing a moving tribute to Kay's powerful poetic voice, while also indicating the potential of drama and theatre in unleashing the performative quality of narratives of identity. The poetic interludes interspersed in the scenes confer a lyrical quality to the memoir, whereas the women's genealogies foregrounded in the adaptation bring numerous affiliative connections into focus. The play is a web of voices including Gupta's own voice, who through the juxtaposition of both *Red Dust Road* and *The Adoption Papers*, has created an intimate connection between the two texts, thus making Kay's tracing of her origins more incisive in the target text, a play that speaks to and celebrates Kay's *oeuvre* as a whole.

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**Floriana Puglisi**

# Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and the Performance of *A Girl's Life*

**Abstract I:** Nato dalla collaborazione fra la poetessa visiva Johanna Drucker e la pittrice Susan Bee, *A Girl's Life* (2002) impiega materiali eterogenei della cultura popolare (riviste per adolescenti, libri di lettura "Dick and Jane", copertine pulp), adesivi, sagome di carta, figurazione originale, variazione grafica e tipografica, per sfatare i cliché sulla vita di una giovane donna. Contravvenendo alle convenzioni letterarie e a relazioni verbo-visive tradizionali, questo libro d'artista coinvolge i lettori in una performance eccentrica che si fa beffe dei copioni narrativi, testuali e di genere, esplorando forme di visualizzazione in grado di favorire nuove percezioni, visioni e cambiamenti dentro e fuori dalla pagina.

**Abstract II:** Born from the collaboration between visual poet Johanna Drucker and painter Susan Bee, *A Girl's Life* (2002) employs heterogeneous materials – images from popular culture (teen magazines, old Dick and Jane books, and covers of pulp novels), stickers, paper dolls, original artwork, layout and typographic variation – to expose and explode clichés about a young woman's life. Eschewing literary and book conventions as well as traditional word-image relationships, this artist's book involves readers in an eccentric performance that flouts gender, narrative, and textual scripts, exploring novel forms of visuality that might foster new perception, vision, and change on and off the page.

**Keywords:** Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, collaboration, word-image relationships, artist's book, textual performance, girl culture and discourse.

As a site for the encounter and interaction of different voices, languages, and perspectives, texts originating from artistic collaboration can develop and unleash a radical potential in the aesthetic as well as in the social and political domains. Contrary to the traditional idea of the author as the inspired, solitary genius, the multi-authored work draws an open and dynamic textual space where identity, especially in the case of 'minor' subjects such as women, may no longer be fixed, but is in the making. A performing space with writing as "action and function of communication" (Vickery 2000: 249); a space where, in the confrontation that takes place with the other, predefined categories are destabilised. 'Collaborator', after all, bears an ambivalent value in the English language since it defines a person working both for and against cultural hegemony.

Such a conspiracy is especially threatening in the case of interart collaborations, which have created hybrid forms based on reciprocity and equality (within difference) that upset the social dynamics of representation, founded instead on relationships of power/knowledge/desire: representation as "something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone" (Mitchell 1994: 180). Furthermore, intermedial texts are intrinsically performative[1] – and hence reveal an inherent transforming power[2] – since they are about the 'staging' (the conscious self-presentation) of media and elicit change: as boundaries are transgressed, media are redefined under mutual influence and a new "resensibilised perception" is fostered (Kattenbelt 2010: 29, 35).

*A Girl's Life* (2002) is the first book in a series of fruitful collaborations between US poet Johanna Drucker and visual artist Susan Bee. The series, which also includes *Fabulas Feminae* (2015) and *Off-World Fairy Tales* (2020), sets feminist imagination at work while revising female images of representation and the tradition of the illustrated book. In particular, this first text explores portrayals of teenage girls and life. If female adolescence, which implies a liminal and dynamic state (an identity in progress), is fixed by the stereotypical images of cultural and media artifacts, the collaborationist quality of Drucker and Bee's joint work explodes gender clichés as well as textual conventions to develop new sights and visions.

The volume has a highly hybrid character not only for its interplay of verbal and pictorial elements, but also for the heterogeneity of its visual materials. Susan Bee collages on the page images of different types and styles selected from products of popular culture that offer hackneyed and biased representations of the female: photos of young girls from teen magazines, child images from the old Dick and Jane readers, and the sensual and/or dangerous women displayed on the covers of pulp novels. This apparatus of ready-made images also includes paper dolls, stickers, original artwork, and typographic variations (font colour and layout), which, added to Drucker's fragmented narrative, results in an eccentric, multi-layered, and multi-coloured textual performance that resists hegemonic discourse structures and counteracts prescribed models of gender performativity.

As an artist's book, *A Girl's Life* develops new word-image connections that reject traditional combinations based on hierarchical and asymmetrical relations. Unlike conventional illustrated books, it is no longer possible to make sharp distinctions between images and text; nor do the images maintain the secondary or ancillary function of showing the contents of a primary, pre-existing text. Words and pictures, verbal and visual elements, rather contribute – on the same level, each in its own way and according to the possibilities of

[1] Whereas 'performing' relates to ritual and the performing arts (i.e. to performance in the literal sense *is performance*), 'performative' implies reference to performance in the metaphorical sense (*as performance*) to include the enactment of social roles as well as literary texts and digital programs based on process, action, and interaction; texts that are no longer objects, "not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships" (Schechner 2013: 2).

[2] For Schechner, the performance shares the function of rites, which produce change (the shift from an initial situation to a new one) and embody a liminal condition, "a fluid mid-point between two fixed structures" (Schechner 2003: 114). His notion of "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior" implies reforming possibilities. Performance is not just doing but re-doing; reiteration, which involves adaptations to novel contingencies, ends in transformation: of means, of effects, or both (Schechner 2013: 29).

its medium – to the construction (or deconstruction) of meaning. Unlike book illustrations, where artist and writer work separately, one (the artist) after the other (the writer), and their work is eventually combined on the page by one more professional figure who is external to the creative process (the editor), artists' books develop from collaboration, from an ongoing dialogue and feedback between painter and writer, who share communicative intention and action. Accordingly, the final text turns from a merely multimedia work, where media borders remain intact, to a more complex intermedial process where it is not possible to remove the words from the images or the images from the words without seriously compromising the whole product, its meaning, and reception[3].

The book narrates – or rather performs – the story of teenage Becki's 'downfall' as seen through the eyes of Dawn, her best friend. Any perspective of a perfect life that is suggested at the beginning ("A girl's life? What could be better!"[4]) is in fact frustrated by the ambiguous relationships entertained with two male characters, Ivan and Malvin, who disrupt the delight of female-adolescent "daily dreams". Drucker took her primary inspiration from the "pink magazines", i.e. those magazines for female teenagers that construct girl culture and discourse, basing her narrative "on Ivanhoe (!)"[5], as she informs, "since that was very much in mind at the time"[6]: an initially long narrative that would be reduced into a shorter and shorter text with the help of Bee. The story, therefore, develops around the presumed desires

[3] On the artist's book, see Drucker (2004), especially 1-19, and Cristofovici (2015). The term 'intermediality' was introduced by Dick Higgins (1966) to identify collaborative works of the 1960s in which the materials of different art forms were conceptually fused. The shift from multimedia to intermedia is in fact the shift from a mere contiguity of different media to a "'genuine' integration […] which in its most pure form would privilege none of its constituent elements". This condition develops a radical potential since it fosters "dynamic, evolutionary process […] and a newly constituting" (Rajewski 2005: 52). Accordingly, the new field of Intermedia Studies, which further develops and/or updates traditional Interart Studies, shifts attention on the materiality of media and its influence on perception; tending to the deconstruction of differences, it dismisses hierarchical relationships that, in the literary context, privilege authorship and the verbal text, and takes into account the specific contributions of the other media (Clüver 2007).

[4] Drucker & Bee (2002). The volume has no page numbers.

[5] There are indeed slight connections between *A Girl's Life* and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819): character names Ivan and Becki might allude to Ivanhoe and Rebecca, while Dawn and Malvin might have been freely developed from Rowena and knight Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert; if language imitates teen talk and the reproduced images belong to the 20th century, the past literary background is scantily suggested by the sentence, "foolish as medieval lovers imagined by romantic writers".

[6] http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/grls.xml (consulted on 2/08/2024). Actually, Drucker might be referring to the "Ivanhoe Game", so called because first played by herself and Jerome McGann with Scott's romance, in a form that was originally paper based (and later turned into a digital project). The Game explores a new (imaginative) approach to critical interpretation that is performance based and collaborative, within the discourse field of historical events or literary works. As McGann explains, "a game strategy is deployed within a field of interrelated textual, visual, cultural, and critical artifacts. The game 'moves' involve the production (the writing) of texts that integrate with and simulate the materials in the discourse field of the game. Players produce texts in response to the opportunities and problems raised by the texts produced by the other players. […] The action does not take place outside but inside the object of attention […] not so much a perceived 'meaning' as a line of the (interactive) system's own developmental possibilities [...] to create a condition for further dynamic change within the system. Understanding the system is operating with and in the system" (2001: 218-219). Likewise, *A Girl's Life* seems to be "generating different lines that are latent but undeveloped by the system" (McGann 2001: 209).

and expectations of young women as set by the pervasive representations of popular culture, which shapes identities, roles, and codes of behaviour ranging from social relationships to language and dress codes, from beauty canons to commodities. To expose the fictive character of such a discourse, the writer offers a self-reflective tale that conveniently emphasises the artificiality of both her own work and of the discourse in which she participates. She therefore shares her ideas about plot development (she might be reporting her conversation with Bee when writing, "Why not add a tragic twist to the tale and let the audience do the rest?") and explicitly mentions forms of representation: "simulacral flame", tabloids ("Inevitable as a tabloid headline", "Both were struck still in the headlines, mutually shocked", "foolish as medieval lovers imagined by romantic writers, and splashed onto the pages of the tabloid press"), shooting studios ("Romance smoked through the stale air of the hot studio", "the set from the sit-com next door", "Violence broke with unexpected force, wrecking the set", "the screen of her vision").

Drucker's narrative and verbal configuration reproduces the excitement and exaggeration – of content as well as of tone and colour – of glossy magazines (and tabloid press). She offers a melodramatic story where the 'innocent' or 'decent' world of romance, fashion, and beauty is combined with the wicked world of seduction and crime, which is altogether spectacularised and promoted as an equally fashionable and attractive lifestyle. At the same time, as the writer develops her plot around the theme of female adolescent crushes and consequential concern for looking pretty, she suggests a direct link between modern "pink magazines" and the tradition of the sentimental novel, which played the same role of influencing and guiding young women's social conduct, especially when relating to men. Virginity is still paramount and promoted as commodity: lines from the text refer to "the *marketable* virtue of repressed behavior" (emphasis added) and insist on 'decorum' ("Decorum had its way with her"; "Becki liked to live right at the edge of decorum in every act"). Yet, Drucker also exposes the obsolescence and, at the same time, construction of female gender scripts with the sentence, "In the real world it's difficult to be a nineteen-year-old virgin these days", which foregrounds the gap between discourse and fact, and clearly suggests the provisional character of what is culture-bound ("these days"). Indeed, she perceives the contradictory signs that girls receive from contemporary culture, which naturalises an emancipated routine of dating and ritual of self-care for public display and appreciation; which capitalises virginity in its double – and antithetical possibilities – of being both preserved and lost.

Teen magazines in particular have a special share in the construction of ambivalent messages that help sustain the economic goals of goods advertising (a major income in the magazine industry) in a capitalist, consumeristic society[7]. Since they pursue the double purpose of selling both copies and the sponsored products, advertising shapes the cultural content as much as editorial material, pointing to the "key role of women as the primary

[7] On the one hand, magazines invite girls to consume goods that will make them sexually attractive; on the other hand, editorial contents warn them against sex (as well as against other transgressive behaviours such as drinking and smoking). Like family, schools, and churches, they "teach girls to engage in moral and socially acceptable behavior but unlike these other institutions, engage openly in an ideological double standard" (McCracken 1993: 141).

purchasers of goods and services" (McCracken 1993: 4). Messages that promote the embodiment of ideal femininity, instilling desire among young female readers, are equally promotional of those goods that help them achieve such an ideal and bridge the gap between desired status and actual condition. The social prestige that will derive from being beautiful, fashionable, and self-confident, is therefore built on inadequacy for the induced feeling of being exactly the opposite: non-beautiful, non-fashionable, and insecure.

This portrait of ideal femininity, however, derives from male expectations (about beautiful girls, dutiful wives, and future caring mothers); even when some license is granted to transgressive behaviour or taboo subjects (usually concerning sexuality), traditional dominant values are never questioned since any potentially subversive element is safely contained within the master narrative of heterosexual romance. If young girls are educated into falling in love (so that they might marry and have children) and initiated into crushes and the social ritual of dating, the relevance given to physical beauty and the necessary goods to achieve and/or improve it (from clothes to cosmetics) are instrumental to the purpose. The social and economic logics intertwine to reinforce each other: the boy is not only an ultimate end of supposedly female desire but "a catalyst for more buying" (Massoni 2006: 40).

In *A Girl's Life*, the relevance given to Becki's crush and date ("the big day", "special moment") is matched by the value of physical beauty ("her strict blonde perfection") and recurrent reference to beauty products that are usually promoted in female teen magazines, whereby Drucker and Bee suggest (and criticize) the bond between patriarchal and capitalist-consumeristic culture. The writer, for instance, includes phrases and sentences such as, "glam soaps", "fruit-flowered products of her skin", "blueberry glitter polish on her nails", "raspberry lip gloss", "the make-up of her cheeks glinted bronze", "hair ornaments". Bee, for her part, has a lipstick and a mirror hang on the extremities of a potted plant (Figure 1)[8]; elsewhere, she reduces a girl's face to her glossy lips (the fragment collaged on the page), whereas the extremely red lips of the half-naked woman from the cover of a pulp novel emphasise the reification of the female body (Figure 2) that women's magazines also accomplish. Here, in fact, in order to support the sale of cosmetics and attract advertisers, editorial contents foster young readers "to dissect themselves conceptually into fragments that various products are promised to improve"; in particular, clothes and accessories, "draw attention (i.e. visual consumption) to certain parts of their bodies and away from others" (McCracken 1993: 138-139). The 'lesson' for girls is that they need to decorate themselves, no matter how intelligent they might be, if they are to win male approval and love (McCracken 1993: 139).

If the consuming girl is herself turned into a product of consumption, an object of male desire, the swerve from the main script (the promise and achievement of romance) foregrounds the gap between imagination and fact. In Drucker's narrative, Becki's

[8] Figures 1-8 are reproduced from Johanna Drucker and Susan Bee, *A Girl's Life* © 2002 by Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc. I wish to express my gratitude to Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, Mary Catherine Kinniburgh and Steve Clay at Granary Books, Inc., for permission to reprint pages and quote lines from the book.

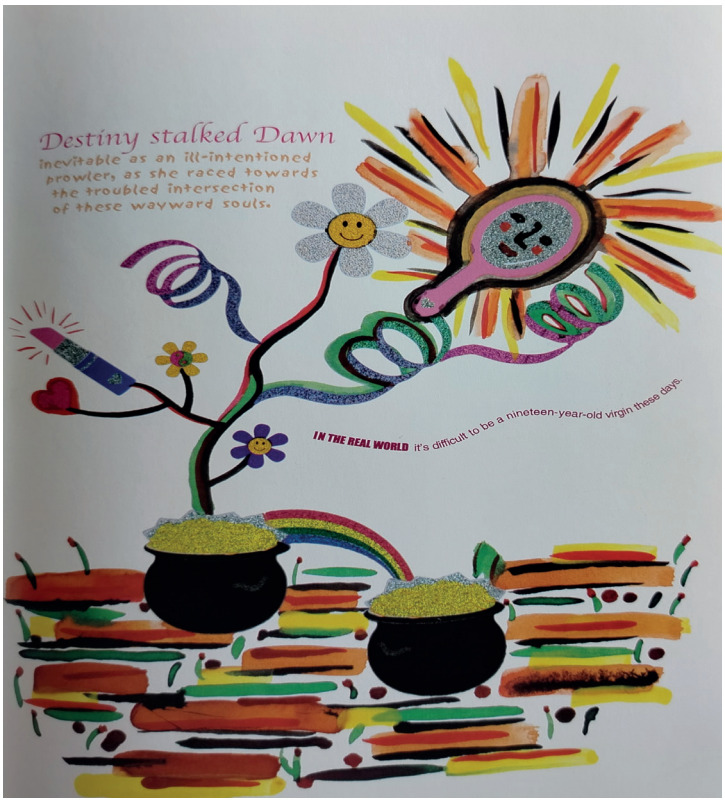


Fig. 1. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

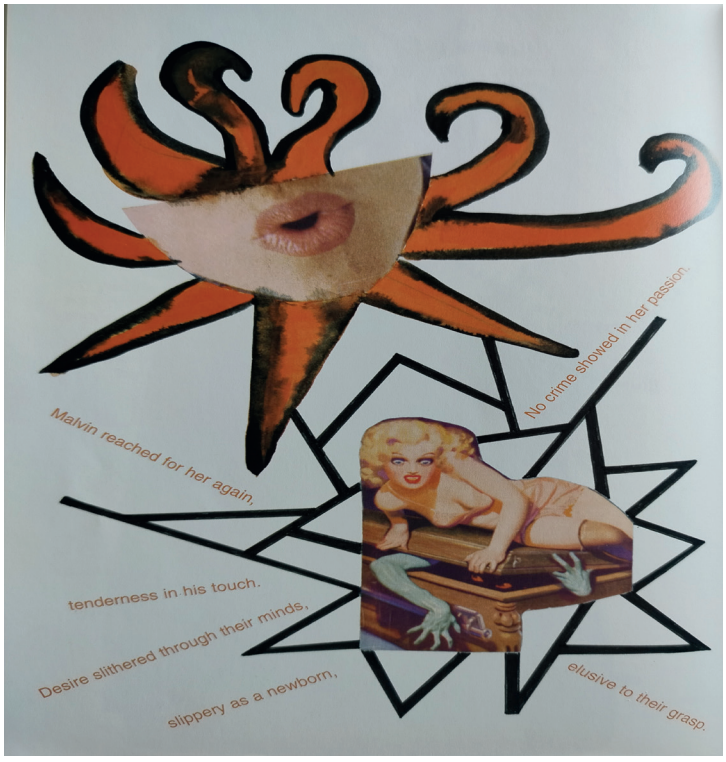


Figure 2. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

expectations of love and romance are haunted from the beginning. Far from being a perfect match, Ivan as a character takes on the connotations of a villain. He is introduced as a "low-life creep with a touch of evil" and is later associated, in Becki's mind, with a psychopathic murderer ("the guy of her dream might be a serial killer"). Love gives way to lust ("he rolled her over and over again"; "Her sky-blue orbs were flush with the purple light of lust") and violence ("violence broke with unexpected force, wrecking the set") when the "special moment" arrives. The tale develops into the "tragic twist" announced a few pages earlier ("Why not add a tragic twist to the tale and let the audience do the rest?"), once Becki herself turns from passive victim to perpetrator of violence: "Becki suddenly turned pale and larval. Her outfit ached against his thighs"; yet, "Transformed from a flower into a stalk of light, Becki killed the man so fast she never even noticed, till he fell, that she had majorly transformed the situation". Violent confrontation is then also repeated in her relationship with "malevolent" Malvin, who is "erotically charged by his Becki obsession". Whereas his phantasy involves bloody images ("He wanted to run his teeth along her till she bled. Open a flesh wound as the threshold to her soul"), his expression "hints at depravity", and "he struggles to keep from ripping that soft flesh out of bonds", Becki is caught "*wrestling* with blueberry glitter polish on her nails […] *Blood* caked around her cuticles" (emphasis added).

Drucker's deconstruction of girl culture and discourse is amplified by Bee's contribution. If the images of girls from teen magazines establish a (relatively) direct link with the verbal contents, representations of children from old Dick and Jane books (issued from 1930 to 1965) and of women from pulp novel covers of the 1940s add quite different and apparently disconnected material that requires readers' collaboration and complicity to bridge the gaps. The addition of further samples from popular culture turns the book into a larger reflection on the systematic way in which cultural products across time and genres work to set stereotypical images of femininity, for any age of life (from childhood to adolescence and maturity), that articulate a dominant, male-centred vision. The stories and pictures of the Dick and Jane primer not only aimed at teaching children the standard use of language, but also intended to teach about proper social behaviour based upon clear-cut gender roles through grammar. The repetition of themes, vocabulary, settings, and patterns of actions-interactions, which associated males with action and females with passive observation, and other semiotic clues such as clothing and colours, offered a kind of initiation into social conventions and expectations. The linear, simple, and redundant character of each story, set in anonymous place and suspended time to foster identification with representative (mythical) characters that never change (Luke 1988: 98), secured the univocal reception of the ideological content. Both verbal and visual codes converged into the construction of a closed text: the repetition, in each story, of previously encountered elements aroused the pleasure of recognition; the stories were merely consumed (therefore passively accepted as the natural state of affairs) instead of being truly understood, interpreted and criticised (Luke 1988: 116).

Female teen magazines continue, in a way, the same work of the old language primer since they also intend to imprint behavioural patterns of socialization for adolescent girls. Significantly, any transgressive attitude is contained within the controlling frame of consumeristic culture, which reinforces dominant moral values and secures young ladies' compliance while confirming them in their role of consumers (McCracken 1993: 136). If the primer insists on images of female innocence and the magazines combine childish innocence with a penchant for transgression, however restrained within dominant discourse about a girl's life, the third kind of recycled images point to the mischievous development of former dutiful daughters, who have grown dark and rebellious, and abandoned domesticity. Yet, on the covers of pulp novels, the explicitly sexualised portrait of women and association with violence, which they either suffer or provoke, is itself a sign of female reification and male prurience. Sex and crime are emphasised and overexposed to seduce male readers; depicted into the exclusive roles of victims or *femmes fatales*, women are spectacularized to attract an audience of men and sell copies.

The three types of images are drawn from multimedia works (the illustrated book, the magazine, the book cover) that combine verbal and visual elements (even if the image is confined to the paratextual dimension of the cover, in the last case) and offer traditional word-image relationships based on coherence and content equivalence. In their original contexts, the pictures provide an ancillary function: they show – and hence reinforce – the verbal message (the illustrated book); they achieve a referential or promotional function (the magazine), or, fully eroticised into the female other, they work like baits to attract a potential

male audience (the pulp novel cover). In *A Girl's Life*, juxtaposed to verbal and visual elements that are foreign to their original discursive contexts, they challenge recognition and defy expectations; they call for readers' interpretation and interrogation of that residue of meaning they still convey by pointing to their former semiotic systems. Defying verbal and visual coherence, which is traditionally served by the illustrative and referential functions of pictures, their inclusion fosters incongruence. Consequently, they are resisted instead of being consumed; they no longer help construct a simple, linear, redundant and repetitious narrative that is immediately digested, but a complex, non-linear, heterogeneous discourse pattern that subverts the ideologically charged narratives they evoke[9]. The process is set by the relationships established on the page: what does the contiguity of these different elements imply? Why do juxtapositions matter? What do they achieve and/or mean?[10] Let us examine a few cases.

On one of the first pages, for instance (Figure 3), Bee invites readers to infer connections by literally joining the image of a girl child from the Dick and Jane primer series and the picture of the typical woman – blond, sexy, half-undressed – represented on the covers of pulp novels. The girl child holds in her hand a small bunch of flowers that is reproduced as a decorative element on her hat and, more covertly, in the shadow it projects, which takes the form of a speech or thought bubble and encloses the picture of the woman. This material connection is then strengthened by similarities between the two female figures. Blond hair suggests that they could be the same person in different ages of her life, admitting the possibility (desire?) for little Janes of growing up as rebels and rejecting domesticity, only to fall prey, however, to the likewise stereotypical role of the *femme fatale* of men's own desire. The little girl, after all, is beautifully clothed, 'decorous' as well as 'decorated' by the flowers on her hat, red lipstick on her lips, and blush on her cheeks. In other words, she is already imagined and imaged as a little woman who resorts to make-up, clothes, and accessories to beautify herself and please men. The dark background of the adult female image (which connotes transgressive conduct) is directly opposite to the bright colours (innocent curiosity) of the child image. Both figures are framed by round lines (the spherical line of the bubble and the semi-spherical

[9] Here the elitist form of the artist's book finds a popular equivalent in the comics. Theoretical discourse about this other hybrid genre, in fact, has 'naturalised' the same non-linear discourse and reading processes, heightened self/medium-consciousness, collaborative authorship, critical distance and active engagement of readers, who confront various – and at times unpredictable – patterns due to the combination of different codes on the same page. Since interpretation requires the processing of words, of images, and of their mutual relationships, readers of comics (also) move back-and-forth for meanings that are never fixed and closed but always negotiable and open. See Sealey-Morris (2015).

[10] In integrated systems of words and images of this kind, where different semiotic elements do not necessarily reflect each other, Mitchell suggests in fact that readers go beyond a pure comparative approach, which exalts either analogy or difference, to interrogate the forms and effects of these connections. Focusing on materiality and literalness, they should start from "the actual conjunctions of words and images" (1994: 90) to assess relationships characterised by "incommensurability" and/or "non-negotiable forms of alterities" (1994: 87). Furthermore, if we accept that "*all media are mixed media*", whereby every medium "already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual, and semiotic elements", attention should fall on the specific contributions and ensuing relationships of and among elements participating in a different way and to a different extent (Mitchell 2005: 260; italics in the source).


Figure 3. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

line of the girl's hat), which are in their turn replicated by the verbal text (surrounding the picture, it follows the same curves instead of flowing straight from left to right).

The images picked from teen magazines, on the other hand, show mainly happy and trendy teenage girls, young couples, smiling and spotless faces (of both sexes). Yet, Bee's attitude is in this case less reverential: to counteract the ideological force of images that construct girlhood within the frame of patriarchal discourse and consumeristic culture, she 'vandalises' some of them. Besides immersing them in a larger, chaotic picture, she adds blots of pink-red colour on girls' cheeks (in the way of make-up brush); she splashes colour on people's bodies; she paints black or grey masks on people's faces and spoils their smiles by colouring (and effacing) their teeth (Figures 4-5). Outrageously funny, her acts carry serious connotations. On the one hand, these manipulations show the vulnerability of images – primarily female – that are over-exposed. On the other hand, these 'assaults' on icons of girlhood, which, produced and released in the context of popular culture, are extremely pervasive, evoke the iconoclastic gestures of British suffragettes in the early 20th century, who disfigured works of art preserved in (hence officially legitimised by) the cultural institution of the museum. Their raids had not only intended to destroy representations of female beauty and/or patriarchal ideals but also to promote new sights and insights[11]. Disguised as innocent play, Bee's 'vandalism' – in tune with the "tragic twist" of Drucker's narrative – is therefore meant to resist and subvert the influence of apparently innocuous images, which are instead representative of biased notions of female adolescence.

[11] The series of attacks started on March 10, 1914, when Mary Richardson slashed Velázquez's *Venus at her Mirror* at the National Gallery, and concluded on July 17 of the same year, with Margaret Gibb's disfigurement of Thomas Carlyle's portrait by John Everett Millais. For an accurate examination of the events and the complex relationships among art, politics, and social justice, see Arcara (2022).


Figure 4. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.


Figure 5. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

Bee's own pictures, finally, exhibit an inherent transformative character that contradicts the fixed images of representations and turn the page into a dynamic field of vision and action. Most images belong to the vegetal world (trees and flowers), which is characterised by growth and development. Here you can see them branching out on the page, usually starting from, or surrounding, a different item. Natural generative images of this kind are matched by the transforming and equally generative power of other pictorial elements. Arrow lines, for instance, develop 'organically' into different forms, changing into leaves and flowers, or into snakes, with a consequent conversion of their trajectory from a straight one into a sinuous one (Figure 6). Other figures include cherries, birds, female shoes, eyes, and insects (bees, butterflies, crickets, ants), which lay over or are contiguous with those from teen magazines. Regenerative transformation and contact eventually secure continuity and fluidity among images of diverse kind, origin, and production.

Absence of clearly defined borders also concerns the relationship between pictures and words. Unlike traditional illustrated texts, there is no boundary between image and text, no separate plane of representation, with the image on a different page or clearly detached from the text by framing borders and/or portions of the empty space above and below[12].

[12] Writing about Magritte, Foucault identifies this "slender, colourless, neutral strip" dividing the text from


Figure 6. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

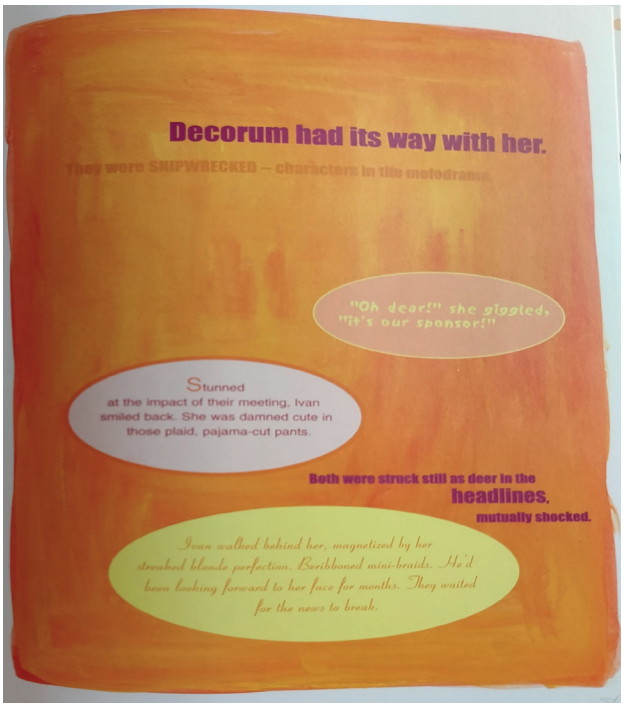


Figure 7. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

Any difference is instead reduced by the emphasis on the visual and material aspect of writing (embodied language), with words acquiring a peculiarly pictorial quality for the use of different colours, font (and therefore shape), and page configuration. Splitting a longer narrative into pieces, Drucker finds the unit of her measure into disjointed sentences that gain the concentration of poetry and/or of the image. When sentences are framed – usually by regular oval or rectangular outlines – they turn into a sort of pictures hanging on a "page wall" or figures on a canvas (Figure 7). Otherwise, they often interact with the other visuals, following the direction of the depicted elements (with circular or zig-zag movements) instead of progressing conventionally (the linear movement from left to right, up-down) (Figure 8).

In work of this kind, narrative content is secondary to and depends on what the writer and artist *do* on the page and to what effects. Engaging in the replication of female narratives and images that claim to show (but indeed prescribe) what a girl's life is, they create a new system where variation (the "tragic twist") and variety (images from different

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the image as a "common frontier" where relationships of designation, nomination, description, and classification are established. Such a space is "an absence of space, an effacement of the 'common place' between the signs of writing and the lines of the image" (1982: 28-29) where "attacks [are] launched by one against the other" (1982: 26). *A Girl's Life*, on the other hand, turns the whole page into that "common place" between words and images: harmony and peace are restored; conflict is replaced by peaceful dialogue that favours integration and mutual empowerment.

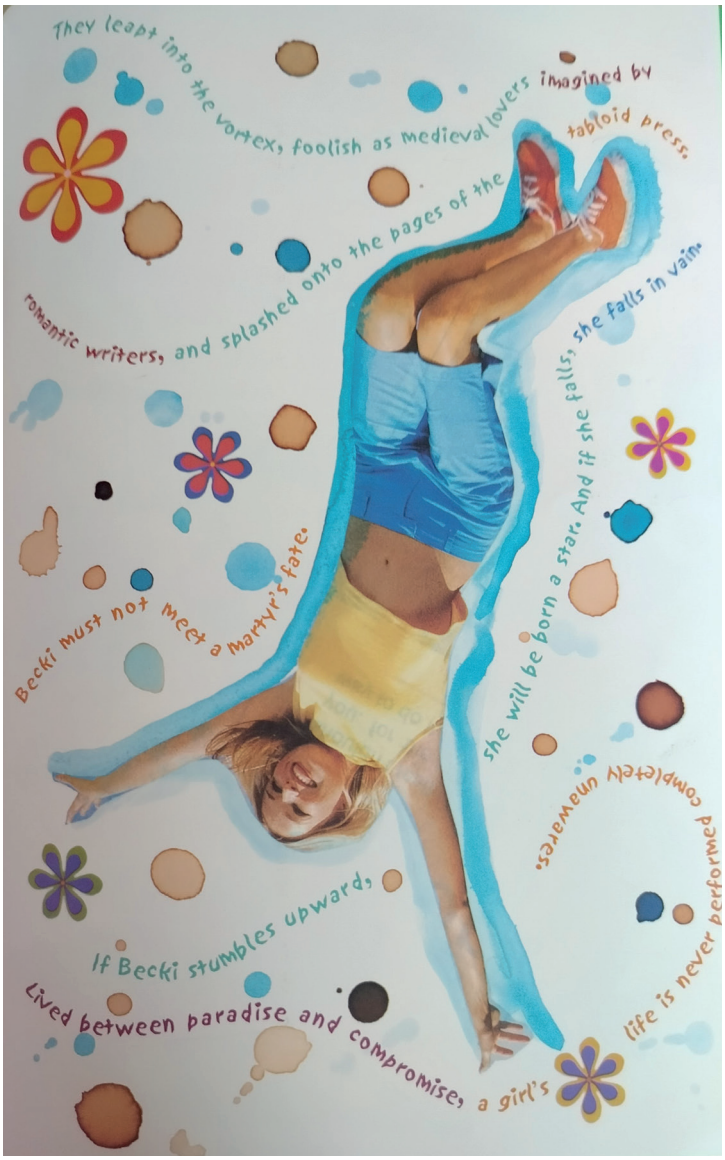


Figure 8. From *A Girl's Life*. Courtesy of Johanna Drucker, Susan Bee, and Granary Books, Inc.

material and discursive contexts) disrupt those images and narratives. Against gender performativity, which confirms biased notions of identity through the reiteration (and naturalisation) of conventional codes of behaviour (Butler 1990), they oppose performance as conscious and shared acts of resistance and transgression to produce change. On the page, this is to be seen in the various alterations that narrative patterns and images undergo: from replication in a different context (with defamiliarising effects) to more active engagement in transformation (Drucker's "tragic twist"; Bee's 'vandalism' against teen pictures); from fluidity of boundaries (between words and images; among images of different kind and production) to generative and transformative patterns (where Bee has one figure develop into another), and textual reconfigurations (the transgression of graphic and typographic conventions).

In the end, the 'operative system' of *A Girl's Life* successfully raises what Drucker names, in the text, "Ecstatic awareness [was Becki's downfall]". This oxymoron well suits the eccentric and transgressing character of a work that opens to difference and alternative meanings. If "awareness" implies conscious knowledge or understanding and is mind – and male – related, "ecstatic" connotes the opposite sphere of feeling ("ecstatic state of good feeling")[13], which is conventionally female related. Furthermore, it is appropriate that "ecstatic" sounds like "aesthetic", because Drucker and Bee's aesthetic program centres upon displacement and

[13] From Greek *ekstasis*, i.e. "entrancement, astonishment, insanity; any displacement or removal from the proper place", or from *existanai*, i.e "displace, put out of place, […] drive out of one's mind"; employed by 17th-century mystics for the "rupture" of the soul in contemplation of divine things (https://www.etymonline.com/word/ecstatic, consulted on 2/08/2024).

removal from 'proper' place to show the inconsistency of gender platitudes[14]. The vision of the text involves readers in an experience of 'rupture' (to be also intended in the literal sense of "breaking": of the fragments collaged on the page; of conventions) that helps them see through the illusion of glamour and reach heightened awareness: "Lived between paradise and compromise, a girl's life is never performed completely unawares" (Drucker & Bee 2002).

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[14] "Doing good and having a great time. Saving the dolphins, the earth, and the starving orphans while making out with your crush in a room with cool stuff. That's what a girl's life should really be" (Drucker & Bee 2002).

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**Raphael d'Abdon**

# Recasting Slam Poetry: Busisiwe Mahlangu's Début Poetry Collection *Surviving Loss*

**Abstract I:** Il rapporto tra oralità e scrittura in Africa ha generato dibattiti di ampia portata. Tuttavia, in questa vasta letteratura non esistono studi significativi sulla transizione dai palchi della slam poetry ai libri stampati. Analizzando i problemi inerenti al processo di traduzione delle performance orali in testi scritti, Scheub (2021) sostiene che i traduttori devono riconcettualizzare le opere originali, creando opere completamente nuove: devono cioè riformularle. Sulla base di questo principio teorico, questo articolo esamina l'evoluzione di Busisiwe Mahlangu da campionessa di *slam poetry* a poeta della carta stampata, analizzando la sua opera d'esordio *Surviving Loss*.

**Abstract II:** The debates on the interface between performance-centric and scripto-centric texts in Africa are far-reaching. Yet, a gap exists in this vast literature, with regards to the transition from slam stages to printed books. Unpacking the problems arising in the process of translating oral performances into written texts, Scheub (2021) argues that the translators must reconceptualise the original works into completely new ones, i.e. they must recast them. In line with this theoretical standpoint, this article examines Busisiwe Mahlangu's evolution from slam champion to published poet, and examines her debut collection *Surviving Loss*.

**Keywords:** Slam poetry, orality, scriptotherapy, Busisiwe Mahlangu, *Surviving Loss*.

> For it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way you tell it. The important thing is to know just at what moment you must knock out your pipe […] Another necessary thing is to know what part of the story to leave out (Bosman 2008: 58).

## Introduction

In a previous article (d'Abdon 2022)[1] I discussed specific aspects of slam poetry, with a focus on slam sessions as liberated zones, healing rituals and holding spaces created by and for the South African youth. The article also celebrates Busisiwe Mahlangu's approach to slam poetry, an art form which she embraced at the dawn of her career to interrogate her vulnerabilities,

[1] See also Schimke (2017).

perfect her craft as a writer, and gain confidence as a public speaker. In her view (and mine), slam sessions are therapeutic happenings that empower silenced/self-silenced voices and allow young writers – women in particular – to tell their stories in honest and creative ways. This article tackles Mahlangu's unique contribution to the advancement of slam poetry and poetry in South Africa by analysing her evolution from slam champion to published poet. This transformative journey is foregrounded in her debut collection *Surviving Loss*[2], making this a case study on the "recasting" (Scheub 2021) of "performance poetry"[3] into a printed medium, to clarify the relationship between performative texts designed for a competition and their reconfiguration for communication to anonymous readers.

**The Poet as Translator: Recasting Slam Poetry**

In his essay "Translation of African oral narrative-performances to the written word", an update of the namesake study published 50 years before (Scheub 1971), Scheub (re)examines the complications inherent in the reduction of oral performances into written texts (Scheub 2021). Oral performances are designed for interactive contexts shaped by circular dialogues between the performer and the audience, while the latter generate a solitary, silent communion between a reader and the page. This "shift from the ear to the eye" is equivalent to a "translation", and the challenges it presents are "considerable" or even "insurmountable" (Scheub 2021: 99). Yet, if a translation is to be achieved, poets "must seek a solution by developing a hybrid art-form, neither the original narrative performance, not a short story, yet borrowing from both art-forms […] Whether or not this can be done in a pleasing way", he adds, "depends on the artistic skills of the translator" who "is doing more than translating a work of art: he is rebuilding it in a new and foreign context, he is recasting it" (Scheub 2021: 104-108).

Busisiwe Mahlangu, the article argues, has fully succeeded in this 'recasting' enterprise, and the vitality of her poetry resides in her answers to Scheub's dilemmas. Previous attempts at this by slammers have produced scant results, but Mahlangu has carried out this generative process with a large degree of success. Her metamorphosis from slam sensation to trailblazing author is unpacked in the following sections.

**Step 1: Unlearning the Slam Modalities**

The circumstances of slam tournaments are different from other literary practices, since participants are mostly beginners unpractised in the difficulties and complexities of writing, competing for a prize in front of audiences and panels of judges (Rivera 2013). The necessity of generating proleptic approval exerts a profound influence on how contestants write and perform, and this pressure determines that the armamentarium of admired slammers (images, themes, performance style, etc.) is instinctively appropriated by other contestants. As popular performances are widely consumed, they become widely imitated, and those imitations produce their own imitations: tropes become clichés and slammers' ideas of what

[2] As anticipated in her reading for The Red Wheelbarrow Poetry Collective, Mahlangu is currently finalising her second collection, *A Body Makes Fire* (The Red Wheelbarrow 2022).

[3] As argued elsewhere (d'Abdon 2018), the definitions of "performance poet" and "performance poetry" are problematic. For practical purposes they are used bracketed in this article.

counts as great (slam) poetry ossify. Slammers are derivative poets, but this is a predictable outcome in an environment that is geared towards confrontation and acquiescence.

The creation of a loyal fan base is also crucial: crowds' warm responses secure victories in competitions and, more importantly, boost the slammer's marketability in "performance poetry" circuits. Consequently, slam events have widened the boundaries of the literary community and brought devoted, ardent audiences to the poetry scene, but have also simplified the way poetry is received: the crowd-pleasing ethos ingrained in the art punishes experimentation and produces conformism, and this tendency toward uniformity is more pronounced in slam than in other expressions of contemporary poetry.

Due to this mimetic *modus operandi*, young scribes who use slams as entry points to poetry tend to uphold a writing style that is convoluted and over-charged: to saturate their performances, they embrace a linguistic *horror vacui*[4] according to which the writer must touch upon as many topics as possible, and offer as many punchlines, rhymes/half-rhymes/internal rhymes, allusions to popular culture, biblical references, similes and metaphors as possible in the standard three-minute slot at their disposal.

Slam pieces seek profusion, a heterogeneous, ill-assorted, breathless grasping at different thoughts. Operating within this imaginative landscape is a severe limitation for a writer, and this idiosyncrasy is reflected in the form of slam poems, which are typically long, ornate, liturgical compositions shaped after a standard tempo, rhetorical devices, grammar, tone, cadence, rhythm, diction, choice of language and images, which the slammer has observed as a winning "formula". Such rhapsodies are devoid of the breaks and silences that make room for imagination, allowing texts to "breathe": the curse of verbosity hovers over suffocating pieces, not in a Joycean sense (where linguistic inventiveness creates musicality), but in the sense of an obsessive metaphorisation, as wittily articulated by Szymborska:

> The fear of straight speaking, the constant, painstaking efforts to metaphorize everything, the ceaseless need to prove you're a poet in every line: these are the anxieties that beset every budding bard. But they are curable, if caught in time (Szymborska n.d.).

As this excerpt from the poem "Parkinson's" by eminent slammer Mutle Mothibe attests, pieces penned according to these criteria strike audiences as rich entertainment, but suffer from the blight of over-writing when eradicated from live settings:

> during our love
> making she was like a certified
> buildings inspector testing how stable
> my beams were like she were looking to
> park her love safely between my skin and bone
> she was a beautiful child at times
> jumping on the shaky ground of our

[4] "Horror of empty spaces", an aversion to emptiness in artistic designs.

relationship with sunlight spinning out
of her pockets my sockets soaking up
what little radiance slipped out from
time to time but it seems she'd only
signed up for the healthy years not the
second ones we put in the fine print of
our marriage contract it seemed that
she couldn't take the shaky earthquakes
and something had to give so now I am
living in light of this dark spin kin to
Parkinson's where broken telephone is
parking since between the shark's will and
fins where darts and pins are felt by my
heart and shins fishing across the sky
for clovers hoping to find peace within my skin (Mothibe 2012).

Expatiation is a slam vice, and alienating devices such as logorrhoea, digressiveness and tautological associations appear also in another much-fêted slam piece, Apiwe Mjambane's "When Hunger Strikes":

[…] i have broken into molecules
of pain digging permanent graves inside of myself
[…]
i want to look like god yet god is painless
and i am here seated like water
waiting for the right time to flow into my depression
[…]
I'm a pizza slice of confidence and two
people underweight yet people are dead
quiet
the awkward silence is loud enough to gang rape me
with pain inside of the kitchen
the kitchen knives fold their arms
over table spoons remain standing
affirmed to feed me
feed me food that won't throw me off like tantrums
shaped like index fingers down my throat that are out in the
insides of opinions about
black little girls' sleeping pillows made of bones in my
belly button my belly button serves me
no justice it collects hunger strikes like
fallen skeletons on the front porch of my stomach
[…]
i carry myself like a coffin
[…] we are the disciples of pain (Mjambane 2015).

These pieces epitomise the technical fixity of slam poetry. Straying thematically far from what audiences expect is risky, so competitors end up focusing on anodyne tropes that win safe plaudit, i.e. trauma and/or identity narratives; in addition, the epidemic presence of words belonging to juxtaposed semantic fields, i.e. death, grave(s), pain, skin, bone(s), body, blood, scar(s), stitches, chains, scream(s), tears, drowning, fire (and related images) pinpoints creative anaemia. Unfortunately, these strategies testify to the verbal and conceptual platitude that has become the hallmark of slam poetry.

Despite this, the sphere of performance makes the problem of one-dimensionality of slam even more accentuated: the concept of "slam voice" (Donaldson 2017) denotes a standardised way of reciting poetry and often gives slam an unhappy status. This ubiquitous, affected vocal delivery indicates the artificial cadence and timbre used by performers, and is characterised by mournful tone, fast pacing, and long crescendos deployed to enhance the overall dramatisation of the act. Pitch patterns and rhythms are repeated to produce a vibrato sound, which is designed to capture strong emotions. Common linguistic factors are pitch and intonation, since slam voice is pitched higher than regular speech and has an unnatural-sounding pattern that tends to recur throughout the performance without necessarily being informed by the content. For these reasons, slam poetry is what Monaghan (via Artaud) calls "spatial poetry", that is poetry that "exists and has its effect on the spectator's senses and consciousness quite independently of words" (Monaghan 2010: 241).

**Step 2: Filling a Gap in the Publishing Industry**

The difference between slam pieces and their versions as recast for publication are as follows: the former prove effective in circumscribed environments (live competitions), while the latter prove amenable in shifting cultural circumstances, where new audiences place different demands on them.

Poetry collections published by slammers are generally weak, for many reasons: a lack of prior engagement with formal literary spaces (most slammers are scarcely published in volumes, journals, magazines, if at all); superficial knowledge of the publishing dynamics; poor professional guidance in the editing process; a combination of some or all these factors. Bypassing the first of these "rites of passage" (which is fundamental for a writer's growth and self-awareness) is often fatal for slammers who decide to venture into printed publications.

All poets know that the stage is the ultimate judge of one's work; yet a "performance poet" who excels in live spaces cannot expect to be equally successful in the muted context of publication without going through a laborious process of study and adaptation. When non-literary audiences are the only quality control system a poet is accustomed to, and their work is not tested regularly against the judgement of detached critical readers, it is easy to get seduced into evaluating slam works as fit for publication.

In general terms, "performance poets" seem to ignore, gloss over or underestimate the crucial principle that a collection is a transaction between a writer and a reader, not between a performer and a listener. In an artistic milieu in which the cultural currency is the monetisation of live acts, the printed book runs the risk of becoming a decoration of the

stage, or another tool in the performer's marketing package[5]: a means to an end, rather than an artwork to be handled with conscious craft.

Poets belonging to the élite of South African slam who have published poetry collections or chapbooks are Vuyelwa Maluleke (2015), Emmah Mabye (2017), Ashley Makue (2017), Katleho Shoro (2017), Koleka Putuma (2017; 2021; 2024), Xabiso Vili (2018), Tshepo Molefe (2020) and Zizipho Bam (2022)[6]. Putuma is the only slammer in this sub-group whose written output has generated critical acclaim and attracted extensive academic attention (Boehmer 2018; Haith 2018; Pieterse 2018; Williams & Molebatsi 2019; Burger 2020; Byrne 2021; Sibisi 2021; Guarducci & Terrenato 2022; McBride 2022; Mohulatsi 2023; Brusselaers 2024); all the other works, including – surprisingly – Mahlangu's have received sporadic commentaries or gone unnoticed[7].

Some of the collections listed above are fine works (Shoro's and Bam's *in primis*), but none of them, including Putuma's renowned *Collective Amnesia* (reprinted multiple times, translated into several languages and winner of the 2018 Glenna Luschei Award for African Poetry), possesses the finesse, the depth and the vigour of *Surviving Loss*. I argue that Mahlangu's success can be attributed to the fact that, in the interest of lyric economy and functional intensity, she is systematically concerned with what can be left out, or rather left implicit rather than made explicit. To elucidate this statement, the next section examines exemplary poems featured in it.

**Step 3: Creating a New Style**

In multiple occasions Mahlangu has highlighted the redemptive power of poetry and her use of it as "scriptotherapy" (McQuail 2009; Tembo 2014; Osamnia & Djafri 2020; Hejaz & Singh 2023; d'Abdon 2024; Hooshmandasl *et al.* 2024): "The centre of everything I am creating is healing", she reiterated in a recent interview with poet and scholar Makhosazana Xaba (2024). This medicinal approach to writing embodies the philosophy of the publisher of *Surviving Loss*[8], and Mahlangu's reading of pain as a black woman is an intersectional articulation of stories of groups long victimised by bodily, economic, racist, sexual and psychological violence. As the poet learns about the long historical chain of suffering that binds her to her family, black women, and her race, she realises how it serves and informs her

[5] When conceived as such, poetry collections are treated as transcriptions of stage scripts and, in the most extreme cases, as stage ornaments. Once I attended the launch of a collection written by a popular slammer: despite holding a copy in her hands, she never read from it, and the "book launch" consisted in the recitation of some poems memorised by the author. The supposedly celebrated object, displayed on the nearby table, was nonchalantly ignored, with the event turning into an awkward, small-scale replica of a slam performance.

[6] The much-anticipated debut collection of slam champion Pakama Mlokoti has not been released yet.

[7] The book is mentioned in Xaba's chapter in her seminal *Our Words, Our Worlds. Writing on Black South African Women Poets 2000-2018*, released in the same year (Xaba 2018: 35). The only critical piece currently available on *Surviving Loss* is an insightful review by Vuyelwa Maluleke (2019), to which this article will return later.

[8] Impepho Press is an independent publishing house run by two prominent South African writers, poet-healer Vangile Gantsho and poet-historian Sarah Godsell. It is named after a local herb burnt by traditional healers in rituals, also used as a natural remedy against anxiety and depression.

own subjectivity: "My mother's mother has done this suffering for my mother / My mother has done this suffering for me / This is how I inherit a scar", she writes in "Birthmarks" (Mahlangu 2018: 19).

The collection documents the re-birth of a wounded girl into a healed woman through the only passage afforded to her: the unfolding pain of her own and her ancestors' lives; it contemplates the genesis of trauma, its ramifications, and the creative efforts envisioned to heal from it, a curative process chronicled in a ground-breaking body of avant-garde poetry.

Innovative art sets itself consciously in opposition to existing aesthetic assumptions: as a slammer, Mahlangu already displayed an unusual alertness to the liminal spaces that magnify the value of silence and the unsaid, making poems evocative. She understood that, to liberate slam from the anathema of inundation and excite spectators who had become inured to vapid offerings, she had to work by subtraction: the pace of the performance had to be slowed down, the pitch had to be tuned down and the texts had to be stripped of congesting elements; astutely, in *Surviving Loss* she uses these poetic methods to an even broader extent.

Slammers tend to add more and more elements to the text in an effort to captivate audiences, producing cluttered pieces: this "more is better" approach, perhaps influenced by contemporary "maximalist" music[9], aims at barraging listeners with full-on aural assaults, and pays off in slam competitions. Mahlagu's poem "Less" (reproduced in full-length below) shows a radical departure from this mindset, and a decisive shift towards minimalist writing. Both in its title and architecture, it points towards the principle "less is more", according to which removing superfluous phraseological units and overwhelming details allows the main parts to shine through clearly, expands the spectrum of possibilities of a concept, emphasises clean aesthetics end enhances imagination; the poem also reveals Mahlangu's virtuous use of spatial design, her attentiveness to the placement of images, variable margins, intra-linear spacing, breaks and caesurae, the visual continuum down the page, the rhythms and inflections with which the poem is to be declaimed when read aloud[10]:

I open my eyes and see half of everything I look at:

the glass on the table is filled to the middle, while the other
half is broken. the table is
smaller than before and our house is left with one room.

my father walks into the room with some of his mistakes. he
shrank his way to forgiveness
with his left side stuck to the past. today he is the right man my
mother loved.

[9] On the topic, see Graves (2014), University of Denver (2021) and Taruskin (2024).

[10] This skill is praised by Maluleke in her analysis of the poem "Rusty knife" (Maluleke 2018: 125). Other poems displaying Mahlangu's mastery in fashioning accurate layouts are "Lost shelves" (Mahlangu 2018: 4-5), "After school" (2018: 7), "Boy breaking" (2018: 15) and "Busy" (2018: 54-55).

we spend our days happy. half ourselves. selflessly on the
clock. we stop digging each other's graves.
we don't hurt enough to start preparing for death.

I can teach you how to feel pain less:

flail your eyelid use half your pupil close your
other eye
this is the best way to run away from home without
leaving (Mahlangu 2018: 49).

Mahlangu's clever engagement with the page is also evident in the poem "Fathers who are water" (2018: 40-43), which may be slam audiences' preferred poem. I think that Maluleke misses the point when she avers that this poem and "House" (see below)[11], which lie vertically on the page, re-orient the eye of the reader to unsettle "the numbness that often comes with reading traditional poetry" (2019: 125). Despite being "traditionally" designed, most pieces in *Surviving Loss* do not fuel this pernicious feeling; therefore, I propose that Mahlangu and her editors, conscious that "Fathers who are water" is the poem most adherent to slam form, have adopted this layout as a disguise, to minimise the off-putting effect printed slam poems usually have on readers.

this house is a culprit
watching us bleed without moving.
[…]
This house
will watch us get killed and say nothing.
The walls wear our blood like paint
our DNA washes off into colour,
[…]
This house will watch us get killed,
the floor will swallow our skeletons.
This house is a graveyard
dry bones pull us back when we walk
[…]
There is a memorial service in each room
old obituaries hanging like curtains
[…]
We have touched death every evening.
We have bled out eulogies and goodbyes ("House", Mahlangu, 35-37).

As the poems above indicate, the connections the poet creates are mental or psychological, rather than verbal or grammatical. Indirection, forms of expressive reticence

[11] In order to comply with a "portrait" page layout, I have typed the lines horizontally, instead of reproducing their original vertical layout.

and symbolic association convey extreme emotion, and occupy a large space in Mahlangu's poetry. An awareness of the principles of association or analogy by which the metaphors are organised, the ambiguities and the syntax by which the terms are controlled, is necessary not only to appreciate her poems, but also to grasp their full effect.

With its central emphasis on trauma and identity, thematically *Surviving Loss* does not depart from the conventional offerings of slam competitions. The collection insists on the trite extended metaphor of the body as a battlefield ("Forgetting home", "If your father was a nightmare", 'Wash me with fire", "Process", "Fixing a daughter", "My body spells happy different", "Worship", "Magic wonder", "Scraps", "Soldiers come home from war", "Violation", "Unbecoming", "Needles", and "Wake up"); in addition, as in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (for instance), it presents the homestead as a symbol for women's intergenerational traumas and everyday struggles for survival ("Safe house", "House", "Fathers who are water", "Less", "Busy", "Come with air"); it also returns to commonplace slam topics like fathers' absence ("Fathers who are water", "Less"), toxic masculinity ("If your father was a nightmare", "What the man stole", "Boy breaking", "Alone"), gender-based violence ("After school") and body shaming ("Worship"). These overlapping themes are no novelty, but it is not for the subject matter that this recuperative literary gem stands out: what underpins its originality is technical prowess and the maturity of the writing style.

In the recasting process Mahlangu reshapes the slam modalities she inherited by judiciously altering and curtailing the oral literature at her disposal. Her persistent focus on the economy of language, manifested in the controlled elimination of the grammatical and syntactical elements that make slam pieces redundant, produces poems characterised by succinctness, sobriety, precision, and therefore effectiveness.

*Surviving Loss* is an imperative collection for readers interested in South African poetry and/or in the interface between orality and the written text, and a seminal work in post-apartheid literature. In my view, Mahlangu's style echoes that of Jackie Kay, one of the most imaginative poets of our times, also preoccupied with issues of trauma, identity, memory, blackness, and womanhood. Most likely independent from Kay's oeuvre, *Surviving Loss* nonetheless comes to the same remarkable results in terms of concentration and inventiveness:

> My grandmother is a Scottish pine,
> Tall, straight-backed, proud and plentiful,
> Her hair tied with pins in a ball of steel wool.
> Her face is tight as ice
> And her eyes are amethysts
>
> ("My Grandmother", Kay 2007: 12)

> We are holding grandmother's face close to her eyes
> We watch her turn from paper to tree an all that
> She lost is just leaves and this is autumn
> Have you seen an empty library breathe?
>
> ("Lost shelves", Mahlangu 2018: 4).

**Conclusion**

In recasting her slam repertoire into a book, Mahlangu revisits the key aesthetic choices surrounding slam poetry and is occupied with the struggle – which is vital for any poet – to transmute her private agonies into something richer, impersonal and relevant to a broad readership. In the process, her agency and autobiographical accounts are generalised and stripped of the contingencies of live competition, her sensibility is intensified and her vision is widened by the awareness of different audiences. The works of young poets are mostly archived in the digital space, yet, because of the systematic disappearance of poetry platforms and websites, and the fleeting nature of social media, the paper book can (paradoxically) still be seen as the most reliable tool for the archiving of literature. Most slammers do not publish their works, much less venture into the production of printed collections; once they have reached a mature phase of their artistic trajectory, they either give up on poetry to pursue other paths or get trapped in sterile circles of "performance poetry", whose offerings have become staler and staler in recent years. The South African poetry scene has produced several outstanding slammers, whose contributions have diversified and energised the literary scene: Mahlangu's ingenious storytelling defies a codified system and a pre-existing form, producing something radically different. It shows that using discernment in engaging with the complexities of the written text is a *conditio sine qua non* for poets who wish to keep evolving and exploring their full potential not only as performers, but also as writers. Such stylistic reconfigurations are redemptive and generative, and Mahlangu's example should stimulate and guide the narrative genius of a generation of oral-art performers who wish to keep innovating the art of slam, but also speaking in socially critical and artistically compelling ways to readers who may be unaccustomed to slam spaces and the poetics of slam.

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**Valentina Rapetti**

# Staging Slavery through Historiographic Metatheatre: Lorena Gale's *Angélique* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*

**Abstract I:** Il saggio analizza due opere teatrali riconducibili al genere del metateatro storiografico. *Angélique* dell'attrice, regista e drammaturga afrocanadese Lorena Gale ripercorre la storia di Marie-Joseph Angélique (1705-1734), la schiava nera processata e giustiziata con l'accusa di aver appiccato l'incendio che nel 1734 distrusse gran parte dell'insediamento coloniale francese di Montréal. *Venus* della drammaturga afroamericana Suzan-Lori Parks verte attorno alla figura di Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), la donna nera originaria dell'attuale Sudafrica che venne esibita in Europa con l'appellativo di "Venere ottentotta". Sebbene sia Gale sia Parks operino nell'ambito del metateatro storiografico, la rimodulazione che ne propongono è influenzata dal ruolo assegnato alla schiavitù nelle narrazioni dominanti del Canada e degli Stati Uniti d'America.

**Abstract II:** This essay discusses two plays ascribable to the genre of historiographic metatheatre. *Angélique* by African Canadian actress, director, and playwright Lorena Gale focuses on Marie-Joseph Angélique (1705-1734), the black bondswoman who was tried and executed for starting the fire that destroyed large parts of the French colonial settlement of Old Montreal in 1734. *Venus* by African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks centers on Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), a native of what is now South Africa, who was exhibited in Europe as "The Hottentot Venus". Though equally invested in historiographic metatheatre, Gale and Parks employ distinct dramaturgical strategies that attest to the different ways in which slavery has been inscribed in the national narratives of Canada and the United States of America.

**Keywords:** historiographic metatheatre, Lorena Gale, *Angélique*, Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*.

> What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?
> (Douglass 2012: 1254).

## 1. Staging Slavery through Historiographic Metatheatre

This article offers a comparative reading of two plays ascribable to the genre of "historiographic metatheatre" (Feldman 2013: 2): *Angélique* (2000) by African Canadian actress, director, and playwright Lorena Gale and *Venus* (1997) by African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. Written and first performed in the late 1990s in Canada and the United States respectively,

the two plays dramatise both documented and imagined episodes in the lives of two black women who experienced the dehumanising power of white colonialism and anti-black racism. Gale's *Angélique* presents the story of Marie-Joseph Angélique (1705-1734), an enslaved woman born on the Portuguese island of Madeira, who in 1734 was accused of and executed for starting the fire that destroyed a large part of the French colonial settlement of Old Montreal. Parks's *Venus* centres on Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), a native of what is now South Africa, who was exhibited in freak shows in Europe as "The Hottentot Venus" and whose skeleton, brain, and genitals were displayed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until the mid-1970s.

By supplementing the sparse and partial archival records that document the existence and exploitation of the two women with their own dramatic imagination, Gale and Parks perform a theatrical enactment of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "critical fabulation" (Hartman 2008: 11), a practice of scholarly investigation that juxtaposes archival mining and imaginative interpretation to rescue black subjects from historic oblivion and epistemic violence. While researching their plays, Gale and Parks realised that the archival records relating to the lives of Angélique and Baartman were nothing more than evidence of their encounters with white power. This impelled them to employ a counter-historiographic dramatic strategy to dismantle the protocols of the archive and foreground its fictions. In formulating "a series of speculative arguments" based on archival sources, they advanced a "critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history" (Hartman 2008: 11). Both *Angélique* and *Venus* dramatise "a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical" (Hartman 2008: 12) to illuminate the suppressed stories of their titular characters from a black feminist perspective. In doing so, they expose the epistemological limits of official historiography and the fallacies of its white Western ontological foundations (Foucault 2002; Mbembe 2002). Throughout the plays, Gale and Parks employ a series of metatheatrical devices that reveal the narrative character of historical accounts, thus inviting readers and spectators to actively acknowledge the performance of power within the archive and the inherent performativity of the history-making process.

I contend that Gale's and Parks's dramatic treatment of the dynamic interaction of historiography and metatheatre allows for a critical reading of *Angélique* and *Venus* mediated by Alexander Feldman's notion of "historiographic metatheatre", a dramatic genre "in which self-reflexive engagements with the traditions and forms of dramatic art illuminate historical themes and aid in the representation of historical events" (Feldman 2013: 2-3)[1]. While injecting into their plays a distinctive set of thematic and formal features ascribable to historiographic metatheatre, Gale and Parks also draw upon divergent structural and rhetorical strategies that attest to the different ways in which slavery has been inscribed in the

[1] Feldman's terminology is derived from Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, the distinctive genre of the postmodern novel. By positioning historiographic metatheatre as the dramatic counterpart to the narrative form, Feldman acknowledges its relationship to Hutcheon's field-defining theoretical work (Hutcheon 1984, 1988, 1989). Prior to Feldman, theatre scholar Richard Knowles had deployed historiographic metadrama as an analytical category for the critical assessment of Canadian playwrights, plays and performances (Knowles 1987, 1999).

national narratives of their respective countries. In other words, Gale's and Parks's national affiliations oriented their subjective adaptation of the manifold dramatic possibilities offered by the genre.

According to Feldman, a play can be described "as *historiographic* rather than simply *historical*" when it deals not only with the events of the past but also with "the way in which they are constituted in the discourse of history", that is, when the play deals with "how history is written and how one conceives of history, in philosophical and ideological terms, prior to and during the process of writing it" (Feldman 2013: 3, emphasis in original). The metatheatrical element of the genre has to do with the playwright's ability to render "the theatricality *within* theatre", thus "provok[ing] questions as to the artifice, the spectacle, and the dramatic constructs of the world beyond" (Feldman 2013: 3, emphasis in original).

Despite being equally invested in the process of re-presenting history through a self-reflexive engagement with the medium of theatre, Gale privileges the historiographic aspect and relies largely on dramatic realism to stage a revisionist, black-centred counter-narrative that questions the erasure of Canadian slavery from hegemonic historical accounts, while Parks favours the metatheatrical element and resorts to an overtly parodic style to make American audiences aware of their perverse and protracted participation in the spectacle of racial and sexual exploitation. As the next two sections will show, these differing approaches are manifest in paratextual elements such as the title, the book cover, and the list of characters, and are further evidenced by the formal features of the two dramatic texts.

## 2. Reinscribing Slavery in Canadian History: Lorena Gale's *Angélique*

Gale's counter-historiographic play *Angélique* challenges a hegemonic narrative that portrays Canada as the North American land of freedom, a place of refuge, tolerance, and equality vis-à-vis the neighbouring United States. Sustaining this dominant narrative are two longstanding national myths that hinge on the popular images of the North Star and the mosaic. According to the North Star myth, Canada's only link with slavery was as the terminus of the Underground Railroad[2], that is, as the geopolitical locus of safety and salvation for runaway slaves of African descent fleeing the southern United States. This self-absolving version of Canadian history entails the erasure of slavery, a legal and vigorously practiced institution in the French and British colonial settlements between 1628 and 1833[3].

[2] The term "Underground Railroad" refers to several semisecret networks that helped slaves escape from the southern to the northern United States and Canada along predetermined routes. The earliest networks appeared in the first decade of the nineteenth century, but organized escapes became much more common from the mid-1830s through the Civil War years (1861-1865). Because slavery was outlawed in the territories of the British Empire in 1833, former slaves in Canada were formally free and relatively safe, although they faced forms of *de facto* segregation and discrimination that also existed in the northern United States.

[3] The first recorded black slave in Canadian history, a nine-year-old Madagascan boy, was sold by an English pirate to a Quebec clerk in 1628, approximately twenty years after Samuel de Champlain established the colonial settlement of New France in the name of King Henry IV. Although French settlers complained of chronic labor shortage and appealed to the Crown for the introduction of enslaved blacks, it was only in 1689 that Louis XIV granted permission to bring them into the colony from the West Indies and Africa. After the British conquered New France in the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the Treaty of Paris of 1763 provided for the legal protection of the institution of slavery and British settlers began to migrate with their black slaves from the

As members of a New World society, European settlers and their descendants were actively involved in the transatlantic slave trade and the exploitation of both enslaved Indigenous and black peoples as a free labour force. In New France first and later in British Canada, members of the clergy, the military, and the mercantile class regularly bought, held, and sold slaves who worked as house servants, farm labourers, or in skilled occupations. However, as Cooper remarks in her historical study *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*, "slavery is Canada's best-kept secret, locked within the national closet. And because it is a secret it is written out of official history" (2007: 68).

Between 1834 and 1982, caught between the dual forces of British colonialism and US capitalism[4], Canadians engaged in what Northrop Frye in his study of the Canadian collective imagination *The Bush Garden* termed "the quest for the peaceable kingdom" (1995: 251), an ideological process of nation-building aimed at mitigating the import of imperial influence by emphasising on the one hand the virtues of British rule – including the abolition of slavery in 1833 – and on the other the vices of American democracy, comprising its belligerent revolutionary spirit, brutal practice of slavery, and legalised racial segregation. The cultural construction of Canada as "peaceable kingdom" was reinforced by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's official 1971 multiculturalism policy[5], which contributed to the more recent mythology of the mosaic, a metaphor for a composite society in which citizens of different origin and ancestry constitute a harmonious whole. Notwithstanding the assertions of equality among all Canadians, multiculturalism diverted attention from social inequities and implicitly espoused an essentialist view of cultural difference. This resulted in the confinement of black Canadians and other historically marginalised groups to separate enclaves and the failure to acknowledge the fluidity of the nation's diasporic identities and their multiple interactions in a modern intercultural society shaped by "the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007: 6) and the transatlantic slave trade, the legacy of colonialism, and old and new migration flows[6].

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American colonies to the Canadian territory. The American Revolutionary War (1776-1783) led to a further expansion of the slave population in Canada, as thousands of Loyalists left the American colonies and fled to British Canada with their enslaved property. When the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, *de jure* slavery was ultimately outlawed in Canada and all British territories. On the institution of slavery in New France, see Trudel (1960, 2004). On slaves of African descent in colonial Canada, see Winks (1997), Elgersman (1999), Cooper (2007) and Mackey (2010).

[4] With the 1867 British North America Act, the three British North American provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick were united into the Dominion of Canada, a self-governing polity of the British Empire. Canada gained full sovereignty and became an independent nation-state with the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Queen Elizabeth II, though it remained part of the British Commonwealth. As the country gradually shed its legal status as a British colony, American capitalist colonialism exerted an increasing economic, political, and cultural influence.

[5] In a statement to the House of Commons on 8 October 1971, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced multiculturalism as an official government policy (Trudeau 1971). In 1982, multiculturalism was recognized by section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was entrenched in the Constitution of Canada that same year. Multiculturalism was further enshrined into law in 1988 through the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which was adopted unanimously by Parliament during the government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

[6] For critiques of Canadian multiculturalism, see Bissoondath (1994), Bannerji (2000), and Gunew (2004).

Over the past four decades, black Canadian women playwrights, such as Gale, Djanet Sears, ahdri zhina mandiela, and Lisa Codrington, have questioned self-indulgent national mythologies by exploring the tensions between hegemonic narratives and subjugated histories. Their artistic practice serves a dual purpose: the representation of the historic struggles of black Canadians over their place in the nation, and the performance of heterogeneous black identities with ties to "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), both national and diasporic. The late anglophone Montrealaise writer Gale is among the black playwrights who most effectively reclaim forgotten pages of Canadian history to tackle the interplay of colonial slavery and present racial oppression through staged enactments of cultural memory. With *Angélique* she addressed the persistent amnesia regarding the institutionalized practice of slavery under French and British rule and integrated uneasy memories into the Canadian collective consciousness, thus challenging the seemingly untarnished image of Canada as "peaceable kingdom" and reinscribing blackness in the national narrative.

*Angélique* dramatises the story of its eponymous protagonist, Marie-Joseph Angélique, colonial Canada's best-known bondswoman and one of the few "martyr-heroes" (Clarke 2002: 31) in black Canadian culture. Born in 1705 on the Portuguese island of Madeira, off the coast of Morocco, Angélique was owned by Nichus Block, a Flemish man, who sometime before 1725 took her across the Atlantic Ocean to New England. There he sold her to François Poulin de Francheville, a thirty-three-year-old Montreal merchant involved in the fur trade, founder of the Canadian iron industry, and husband of Thérèse de Couagne, who was from an influential mercantile family that had links to the colonial elite. Angélique entered the Francheville household in Old Montreal in 1725 at the age of twenty and served as a domestic and agricultural slave for nine years. In 1731 she gave birth to her first son, who died a month later. Jacques César, a Madagascar-born black slave owned by Ignace Gamelin, Francheville's neighbour and business partner, was named as the father. In 1732 she gave birth to twins. The boy, whose father was registered as César, survived two days, while the girl, whose father, oddly, was listed as unknown, lived five months. In 1733, the year her master died, Angélique started a relationship with Claude Thibault, a white, French indentured servant who worked for the Franchevilles. The following year the couple attempted to flee Canada but were caught and brought back to Montreal. Prior to their escape, Thérèse de Couagne had sold Angélique to a business associate who in turn planned to sell her to the West Indies. On April 10, 1734, a fire that started on the Franchevilles's roof engulfed forty-six buildings; there were no victims, but most of the merchant sector of Old Montreal was destroyed. Accused of being the arsonist, Angélique was subjected to a two-month trial, tortured into confessing, and executed by hanging. Her corpse was dismembered and burned, and her ashes scattered to the winds[7].

Drawing on the trial transcripts from both the lower court in Montreal and the Supreme Court of Quebec, where an unsuccessful appeal took place, Gale dramatises a black-centred counter-narrative that questions the North Star mythology by evidencing the brutality of

[7] For the most comprehensive study of Angélique's life in the broader context of the transatlantic slave trade, French colonialism in Canada, and the urban settlement of Old Montreal, see Cooper (2007).

institutionalised slavery in the colonial settlement of New France. While the French archival documents on which the play is based attest to the power that white settlers and slaveholders exerted over those they subordinated, Gale's play foregrounds the embodied experience of an eighteenth-century black bondswoman in Old Montreal to assert an alternative truth that exposes the "invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts […] and fantasies that constitute the archive and determine what can be said about the past" (Hartman 2008: 9). To support her counter-historiographic intent, Gale draws upon what Patricia Schroeder calls "the feminist possibilities of dramatic realism" (Schroeder 1996) and employs paratextual and textual elements that align with the tenets of the genre.

The title of the play is the baptismal name that the Francheville imposed on their black slave in 1730 in place of her previous, unrecorded name. The cover of the Playwrights Canada Press edition shows a realistically drawn, stern-looking black woman in period dress staring directly at the reader while in the background flames consume the buildings of Old Montreal in an equally realistic representation of the 1734 fire. This mimetic approach is reflected in the chronotope of the play, which is set in eighteenth-century Montreal, as well as in the *dramatis personae*, which include: Marie-Joseph Angélique, a "slave, in a Canadian history book" (Gale 2000: 2); François Poulin de Francheville, owner of the St. Maurice Ironworks and the slave Angélique; Thérèse de Couagne, Francheville's wife; Claude Thibault, Francheville's indentured servant and Angélique's lover; Ignace Gamelin, Francheville's business partner; César, Gamelin's black slave and lover to Angélique; Manon, an Indigenous slave owned by the next door neighbours of the Franchevilles, and six eyewitnesses who testified at the trial. The characters, all drawn from archival records, are listed with their real names and ages at the time of historical events and are assigned the same rank and status that they held in the strict social hierarchy of eighteenth-century New France. As the play realistically shows, this was a colonial outpost where settlers of both sexes subjugated enslaved Indigenous and black peoples, and white men exercised patriarchal power over women irrespective of their race. Period costumes, set, and props suggest the mimetic staging and style of acting required in production and performance.

The play is divided into two acts, the first comprising eighteen scenes, the second twenty-four. The dramatic action progresses chronologically, following a conventional arc of exposition, complication, and rising action that culminates in the execution scene. However, the falling action and resolution that follow the climax in traditionally structured plays are deliberately avoided to deflect cathartic release. Act One encompasses the period between 1725 and 1733, from Angélique's entry into the Franchevilles's household as a chattel slave up to her master's death. The central scenes chronicle salient episodes in Angélique's life as recorded in archival documents, including her two pregnancies, the deaths of her three children, and the overtly contentious relationship with her mistress. However, they also depict what is supposedly missing from historical records, including Francheville's repeated sexual assaults and outbursts of patriarchal rage, Couagne's regular beatings and fits of jealousy, and a scene in which Angélique and César are forced by their respective slaveholders to engage in sexual intercourse to cover Francheville's repeated rapes while increasing their masters' moveable possessions. By exposing the power dynamics and interlocking systems of oppression at work in the Franchevilles's household, these scenes

provide a graphic illustration of the physical and psychological violence perpetrated against enslaved individuals in New France, and particularly the dehumanising ways in which black bondswomen were routinely exploited for both productive and reproductive purposes. In a rapid succession of increasingly fast-paced scenes, Act Two chronicles Angélique and Thibault's growing intimacy and escape, Couagne's decision to sell her rebellious slave, the Montreal fire and ensuing trial, and Angélique's capture, torture, and execution.

Overall, the play juxtaposes documented and imagined episodes of Angélique's life within a realist framework to present two competing truths: one, sanctioned by a sentence and inscribed into hegemonic historiography by white male colonial authorities; the other emerging from the subjugated story of a black bondswoman. Gale's recourse to "the feminist possibilities of dramatic realism" is thus consistent with her "commitment to understanding the cultural construction of 'truth' – the way material conditions such as economic status, class background, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation combine and recombine to […] shape what we call reality" (Schroeder 1996: 26).

The opening image of the play eloquently conveys Gale's counter-historiographic intent: "The sound of African drumming. The featureless silhouette of a woman dancing with a book against a backdrop of red, oranges and yellow, suggestive of flames" (Gale 2000: 3). The book that the woman – Angélique? Gale? – is holding as "the crackling sound of fire" (Gale 2000: 3) engulfs her is the repository of hegemonic historiography. As such, it must be immolated in order for Angélique to rise from her own ashes and tell her story on her own terms, a story that was silenced by the judges who formulated the dreadful death sentence and subsequently omitted her from dominant national narratives. This historical omission is highlighted in the opening line of the play, spoken by a voiceover emanating directly from the book: "And in seventeen thirty-four a Negro slave set fire to the City of Montreal and was hanged" (Gale 2000: 3). The statement is repeated twelve times, with the first word dropped at each repetition until only the word 'hanged' is left, suggesting that Angélique existed only to be progressively exploited, consumed, and systematically erased, her existence eroded by toil and time.

Throughout the play the voice of the book – that is, the silencing voice of hegemonic power disguised as neutral archive evidence – repeatedly asserts itself in a series of ostensibly objective statements in which Angélique is referred to in the third person as a "a negro slave" or "negresse" (Gale 2000: 5, 41). These archival excerpts have a twofold function, historiographic and metatheatrical, which directly aligns Gale's play with Feldman's theorisation of historiographic metatheatre. In Act One, the information reported in the trial transcript from the deed of sale, and the birth and death certificates and baptism records of Angélique's children is delivered in the form of direct address, as the following excerpt from scene fifteen shows:

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉSAR: | Eustache. Natural son of Marie Joseph Angélique and Jacques César. Baptized, January 11, 1731. Buried, Feb. 12. 1731. Age … |
| ANGÉLIQUE: | One month. |
| CÉSAR: | Louis: *fils naturel de la meme negresse* and brother of the previous. Born and baptized May 26, 1732. Buried the next day. Age … |

ANGÉLIQUE: Two days.
CÉSAR: Marie Françoise, twin sister of the preceding. Buried October 29, 1732. Age …
ANGÉLIQUE: Five months.
CÉSAR: Father – unknown. Though the mother declared it to be Jacques César (Gale 2000: 30).

These lines serve the clearly didactic purpose of informing and instructing the audience as to the historicity and veracity of Angélique's existence, while the brutal scenes scripted by Gale concomitantly reveal the unrecorded truth of her embodied experience, thereby reinforcing the testimonial value implied by the historiographic nature of the play. If in Act One the spectators are witnesses to the forms of depraved violence that marked Angélique's life and the institution of slavery in New France, in Act Two they are implicitly cast as jurors and judges of a diachronic appeal, a call to participate actively in the truth-seeking process of the original trial as dramatised by Gale. As the depositions of eyewitnesses to the 1734 Montreal fire are staged, a trial within the theatre unfolds before a court of contemporary spectators. This accounts for the metatheatrical dimension of the play, compelling the audience to acknowledge the performativity of the criminal justice system and the history-making process.

The conflicting realities of legal, historical, and embodied truth converge and resonate in the theatre-turned-court, until the voice of the book pronounces the final judgment, condemning Angélique, "the arsonist", to be tortured, "taken to the public place of the […] city of Montreal, […] hanged and strangled to death from the gallows erected for that purpose, her body burned at the stake, the ashes scattered to the wind and her belongings seized in the name of the King" (Gale 2000: 69). Gale, however, uses the final lines of the play to resist the historical objectification of Angélique sanctioned in the trial transcripts and to rehabilitate her subjectivity through a scripted act of embodied memory. The direct address that Angélique delivers during the execution scene is a climactic moment in which she metaphorically tears down the fourth wall to speak her own truth in the first person:

> My name is Marie Joseph Angélique. / I am twenty-nine years old. / I came from Portugal, from the island of Madière / Where I was sold to a Flemish, / Who brought me to this New World / And sold me to Monsieur de Francheville. […] There is nothing I can say to change what you perceive. / I will from twisted history, / be guilty in your eyes. / If thought is sin / then I am guilty. / For I wish that I had fanned the flames / that lead to your destruction. / But though I am wretched, / I am not wicked. / Take my breath. / Burn my body. / Throw my ashes to the wind. / Set my spirit free. / The truth cannot be silenced. / Someday, / Someone will hear me / And believe … / I didn't do it (Gale 2000: 71-72).

By having Angélique proclaim her innocence in the public space of the theatre, Gale authenticates an alternative version of history that rectifies the "twisted" (Gale 2000: 71) one articulated by androcentric archival authority. Her iconic representation of the heroic

martyrdom of an eighteenth-century black bondswoman disturbs and dismantles Canada's idealised memorialisation of white explorers, pioneers, and settlers. It reinscribes an enslaved figure in the national narrative, thus correcting collective amnesia regarding the institution of slavery in colonial Canada and rewriting its history from a black feminist perspective that "fill[s] in the gaps in the histories of black women" (Anderson 2008: 115). Gale's heroic portrayal of Angélique anchors her black-centred, revisionist dramatisation of Canadian historiography to a "mnemonic icon" (Cuder-Domínguez 2021: 332), a hagiographic image of subjugated and yet resilient blackness that is reminiscent of those generated in the United States by the representational apparatuses of the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements. As the next section will discuss, the glorifying effect of Gale's finale is nowhere to be found in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*. Instead, its counter-historiographic intent is manifested through a metatheatrical demystification of the rhetorical repertoires of both anti-black and anti-racist discourses.

**3. Refracting Slavery in American Theatre: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus***

The institution of slavery was a determining factor in the ascendance of the United States as an economic world power, and it played a crucial role in the formation of the country's constitution and legal structure (Finkelman 1993) as well as in the development of its national identity. Constructed conceptually as an original sin exorcised through the moral and political efforts of the abolitionist movement and the collective sacrifice of the Civil War (1861-1865), the end of the so-called "peculiar institution" (Stampp 1956)[8] became an essential building block of a progressive narrative arc bending towards the "liberty" and "pursuit of happiness" envisaged in the Declaration of Independence (1776). The transition of enslaved people of African descent from property to personhood and then citizenship nurtured the foundational mythologies of American exceptionalism and upward social mobility, contributing to the ideological construction of the "more perfect union" enshrined in the Constitution of the United States (1787).

Since the end of the Civil War in 1865, when institutionalised slavery gave way to *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, disenfranchisement, and persisting forms of economic and physical abuse, African American citizens have contested liberal narratives that celebrate the progressive incorporation of former slaves and their descendants into the democratic body politic and avert any discussion of the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007: 6) and the ways in which systemic anti-black racism has impeded the advent of a truly egalitarian society. Throughout the twentieth century, the perpetual deferral of equal rights and opportunities resulted in the formation and insurgence of activist groups that adopted both assimilationist and separatist, non-violent and belligerent positions to protest permanent second-class citizenship and the persistence of structural racism.

Historical anti-racist organizations such as the Civil Rights and the Black Power

[8] The euphemistic expression 'peculiar institution', chosen by historian Kenneth M. Stampp as the title of his seminal 1956 book on slavery in the antebellum South, was used by white anti-abolitionists, most notably statesman John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), to portray Southern slavery as a relatively mild system compared to more brutal forms of forced labor found in foreign countries and in the northern states.

movements decried the dominant discourse of continual progress promoted by liberal democracy while concurrently formulating oppositional counter-discourses hinging on heroic images of black resistance that became part of a recognisable rhetorical repertoire. If white abolitionists had pursued their pedagogic intent through sensational displays of "spectacular violence" (Hartman 2022: xxix) exerted on the enslaved, black activists chose to represent Americans of African descent not as victims but as agents, highlighting self-determination against oppression, and embracing the narration of stories that resonated with a sense of empowerment rather than the "social death" (Patterson 1982; Wilderson 2020: 17) deriving from historical exploitation. This race-conscious representational strategy was employed in both the political arena and the artistic realm, leaving a significant and enduring legacy in African American theatre.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement regarded theatre as a tool for black liberation and playwrights as activists who were directly involved in the political struggle of the African American community. The cultural wing of the Black Power Movement operated within an ideological framework where ethics and aesthetics overlapped, and art and activism intertwined. In their politically oriented manifestos, militant dramatists such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal urged audiences to take action against racial oppression and underscored the importance of staging plays and performances that reflected black pride and power. However effective in challenging the dominant narratives of liberal democracy, this overtly oppositional aesthetic entailed an essentialist view of blackness and a dogmatic approach to theatre-making that paradoxically paralleled the didactic intent of the white-dominated abolitionist movement. If white abolitionists, in their efforts to advance American democracy, had concurred in reinforcing concepts of abject blackness while condemning slavery, the Black Arts movement, in combating anti-black racism, contributed to the cultural production of what George Elliott Clarke referred to as "a model blackness" (Clarke 1998), a dominant notion of black identity derived from the history of US slavery and the African American struggle for emancipation and social justice.

Since the beginning of her career, Parks has been unequivocal in her stance against a prescriptive theatre aesthetic and the monolithic representation of a single black experience. In her essay "An Equation for Black People on Stage" she maintained that African American playwrights "should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being" while "there are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage" (Parks 1995: 19-21). In declining to portray what Black Arts Movement founder Neal called "the viewpoint of the oppressed" (Neal 1968: 30) in a deliberate or didactic way, Parks broke away from the ideological and artistic legacy of her theatrical forebears, opting for a self-reflexive rather than instructive approach to the art and practice of stagecraft. Rather than dramatising black-centred counter-narratives that directly address and rectify hegemonic historiography, Parks takes a sideways look at history to draw attention to the narrative nature of the historiographical process itself, focusing on the ways in which the black subject has been constructed as abject and how this construction has contributed to the ongoing marginalisation of black people in what Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer refer to as the US "racial order" (Desmond & Emirbayer 2015).

In *Venus*, she juxtaposes ordinary displays of brutal violence with what Hartman identifies as less obvious "scenes of subjection", including the "blows delivered […] on the popular stage", the "simulation of will in slave law", and the "fashioning of identity", thus illuminating both the "habitual violence that structured [the] everyday life" (Hartman 2022: xxx) of the enslaved and more subtle practices of domination. Parks's examination of the role of black subjects as entertainers for white audiences aligns her experimental theatre practice with Hartman's groundbreaking research, pointing to the performative dimension of slavery as an important element in understanding the workings of the institution.

Baartman, "the most globally overexposed figuration of black women's […] sexual subjection" (Pinto 2020: 105), and the pivotal character of Parks's *Venus*, represents the ideal figure to explore "the performance of subjection" (Hartman 2022: 7) and the domineering power of the white gaze during slavery and in its aftermath. A member of the Khoi-San peoples born under Dutch colonial rule in what is now South Africa, at the age of twenty-one Baartman was taken to Europe, where her black skin, protruding buttocks, and genitalia were read as signifiers of black inferiority and turned into objects of popular spectacle and scientific knowledge. From 1810 to 1815 she was exhibited as "The Hottentot Venus" in freak shows in London and the English provinces as well as in the circus and in private shows in France. As a black African in early nineteenth-century England and France, she possessed a liminal legal status between enslaved and free. Although slavery was formally outlawed on British[9] and French[10] soil at the time, it was fully legal in the colonies, and those who had acquired human property abroad could retain or return it at their will. Indeed, after the English court recognised Baartman's capacity to consent to performative labour and enter a contract, she was sold by the same enslavers-turned-managers with whom she had negotiated a supposedly consensual agreement. As Sharpe (2010) and Pinto (2020) have pointed out, the legal vacuum that entrapped Baartman – neither a consenting citizen, nor a coerced captive – heightened her physical and economic vulnerability and it also serves as a means for considering her exploitative treatment within, but also beyond, the framework of enslavement. In Paris, the animal trainer who had bought and exhibited Baartman also rented her to Georges Cuvier, Napoleon's surgeon general and the founder of comparative anatomy. Eager to prove that the Khoi-San peoples were the missing link between humans

[9] In the 1772 case of Somerset v Stewart, Judge William Murray ruled that it was unlawful for Charles Stewart, a British citizen, to forcibly take James Somerset, an enslaved African he had purchased in Virginia, out of England. Although Murray was careful to avoid offering a ruling on the legal status of enslaved people and their rights in England, his decision was interpreted as indicating that slavery was illegal in England, and this proved to be a landmark contribution to the abolitionist cause.

[10] In 1791, two years into the French Revolution, the Constituent Assembly issued a decree that declared all persons residing in France, regardless of race, were free and possessed the rights associated with French citizenship. In 1794, the decree abolishing slavery was extended to the French colonies, although it was only implemented in Saint Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Guyana. In 1802, Napoleon issued a decree confirming that slavery was to be maintained under the pre-1789 legal code in all French colonies where the 1794 decree had not been implemented. Additionally, the decree permitted local authorities to re-establish slavery in French colonies where it had been abolished. Slavery was definitively outlawed in all French colonies by the Abolition Decree of 1848, issued during the Second Republic.

and apes in the secularized Great Chain of Being, a hierarchical system of classification of life forms implying a linear and progressive understanding of evolution, Cuvier gathered a group of scientists to measure and examine Baartman's body. Upon her death in 1815, he obtained permission from the French government to dissect her corpse for scientific purposes. His seemingly objective anatomical notes, a telling example of scientific racism, were published and delivered as lectures in 1817, while Baartman's body cast, bones, preserved genitals and brain remained on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974. Her remains were eventually repatriated in 2002[11].

Cuvier's dismemberment of Baartman's body is represented in the fragmented form of Parks's *Venus*, which combines historiographic and metatheatrical elements to stage a postmortem narrative of Baartman's dissection through the postmodern techniques of pastiche, parody, and intertextuality. By infusing the play with textual excerpts from early nineteenth-century historical records, court documents, anatomical notebooks, and academic lectures, Parks exposes the fictional nature of factual accounts and the dramatic qualities of historical and scientific discourse. Fully aware of the fallacies of official historiography, she treats archival sources as man-made artifacts enmeshed in a matrix of discursive and representational practices whose functioning is both regulated and legitimized by systems of knowledge and power structures that mutually sustain and reinforce one another.

Parks's ability in "provok[ing] questions as to the artifice, the spectacle, and the dramatic constructs" (Feldman 2013: 3) inherent in the history-making process is evident in the anti-mimetic style that permeates the play, as announced by its title. *Venus* is the stage name imposed on the already fabricated name of Sartjie Baartman to identify an African woman who was exhibited in freak and animal shows as an exotic curiosity. As Kornweibel points out, the title indicates "a focus not on the ability to recover an individual whose interior life is sadly lost to history, but rather on the ways in which western 'civilized' culture has written this figure into their own mythology" (Kornweibel 2009: 71). In the cover design of the Theatre Communications Group edition, the vertically displayed title is superimposed on two overlapping, slightly blurred silhouettes of Baartman, a replica of the hypersexualised image that was used to advertise the shows. Parks's use of the same stage name and promotion materials that were employed in the nineteenth century to economically exploit Baartman and position her as an abject Other signals a provocative alignment: by creating and consuming the show, the playwright and the audience are complicit in what Jean Young has defined as "the re-objectification and re-commodification of Baartman" (1997). By looking at both the book cover and at the billboard of the theatre production, readers and spectators are made aware of their own predatory gaze and willing participation in the perpetual consumption and exploitation of racialised images of blackness. In other words, the paratextual elements show that what Parks intends to dramatize is not Baartman's true story, but the spectacle that has been made of her body.

The play's anti-mimetic style is also signalled by the *dramatis personae*, which include

[11] For a meticulously researched account of the life of Baartman set against the backdrop of Dutch colonialism in Africa, Britain's abolitionist movement, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars, see Clifton & Scully (2009).

four roles, five characters, and a chorus. The four roles are Miss Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot; The Man, later The Baron Docteur; The Man's Brother, later the Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum; and The Negro Resurrectionist, who acts as a master of ceremonies throughout the performance. The five characters appear in a play within the play entitled *For the Love of the Venus*, Parks's melodramatic parody of an 1814 one-act vaudeville written two months after Baartman's arrival in Paris to capitalise on her popularity[12]. The eight members of the chorus embody different ensembles as the play progresses, including the "Human Wonders" (Parks 1997: 19) from a freak show, a vaudeville audience, the judge and witnesses in the English trial, and a group of anatomists attending Baartman's dissection. All the roles and characters, except for Baartman, are listed by common nouns rather than proper names, a choice that overtly rejects any attempts at historical authenticity and psychological realism. In Parks's non-realistic cast list, all the actors, except for those playing Baartman and the Negro Resurrectionist, perform multiple functions in a rotating mode that mimics the circular construction of the play.

The structure of *Venus* comprises an overture and thirty-one scenes listed in reverse order, a downward arrangement that inverts the sequential chronology of realist drama to reflect Parks's critique of progressive historical narratives, social Darwinism, and the American myth of upward mobility. As the play opens, the Venus turns counterclockwise on a rotating platform. This image immediately establishes an inversion of centre and margin, positioning a historically marginalised subject at the centre of the stage and making her the gravitational pull of the show. In the circus that serves as the framing device of Parks's play, however, Baartman is physically displayed and linguistically constructed as a deceased object of spectacle for an audience of greedy necrophiliacs. Although in the overture The Negro Resurrectionist announces that "thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead" and "[t]here wont b inny show" (Parks 1997: 3), the performance continues in the form of a grotesque sideshow that dramatises the diasporic displacement of Baartman following her northbound journey from South Africa to Europe. The thirty-one "scenes of subjection" (Hartman 2022) illustrate Baartman's descent from human to animal to scientific object, until the circus reverts to the starting point. When The Negro Resurrectionist reannounces Baartman's death in scene one, the play ends where it began to potentially begin once again. This endless circular movement suggests what Sharpe (2010) sees as the impossibility of redressing Baartman's physical violation, simultaneously evoking the past and present cycles of violence inflicted on black bodies. It also points, however, to the incessant artistic and critical investment in Baartman as "the ur-subject of black feminist theorising around sexuality", an exhausting investigation that involves the repetition, reproduction, and revision of racist representations

[12] For a comprehensive examination of *La Venus hottentote, ou Haine aux Françaises*, the 1814 vaudeville show by French playwrights Emmanuel Théaulon, Armand Dartois, and Nicolas Brazier, see Sharpley-Whiting (1999). In her own time as well as in the years following her death, Baartman's racialised and hypersexualised body became the subject of newspaper cartoons, ballads, and other forms of popular art. Her iconic figure has inspired a rhizomatic range of contemporary visual art, poetry, drama, and fiction that extends far beyond the scope of this essay. In *Black Venus 2010: They Called her "Hottentot"* (2010), Deborah Willis and Carla Williams assembled an impressive survey of art, critical essays, and poetry that represent an exhaustive variety of responses to Baartman over the years, grappling with her historical presence and enduring legacy.

of her black female body, ultimately leading to what Pinto terms "black feminist fatigue" (Pinto 2020: 106, 126).

The play's fragmented circularity and lack of closure eschew a linear narrative arc and formal resolution typical of dramatic realism in favour of an open-ended and unresolved finale that compels readers and spectators to reexplore the entire play to make meaningful connections between its various parts. This reflexive tension runs through the metatheatrical fabric of *Venus*, and its multiple performative settings and interior play combine to represent Baartman's journey through different theatres of exploitation, from the Dutch colonial settlement in Africa to a supposedly civilised Europe. The overtly metatheatrical sections comprise the freak show, the trial, the play within the play, and the anatomical dissection-turned-lecture, during which Baartman is alternately transformed into an object of white entertainment, white saviourism, white lust, and white scientific racism. In staging diverse spectacles of race-based violence, Parks demonstrates that whether making Baartman play a savage animal in a stage cage, perform as the vulnerable victim in an English courtroom, take on a hypersexualised character in vaudeville, or pose in an anatomical theatre, white Europeans exposed her body to posit blackness as irrevocably inferior and affirm their supremacy through the disciplining and domineering power of the white gaze.

In the metatheatrical scenes, as the audience of *Venus* watch the various onstage figures watching Baartman, Parks draws attention to the "spectacular violence" (Hartman 2022: xxix) entailed in the act of looking, shifting the gaze away from Baartman's violated body and back onto itself. Through this self-reflexive dramatic device, contemporary audiences are made aware of their perverse participation in the spectacle of colonial, racial, and sexual exploitation disguised as popular entertainment, juridical discourse or scientific practice. By staging repeated acts of voyeurism in a distinctly metatheatrical framework, Parks implicitly casts the audience members as voyeurs themselves, thus extending complicity in the consumption of racialised images of blackness from the spectators onstage to those in the theatre. This is particularly evident in the intermission scene, when "[h]ouse lights should come up and the audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre, take their intermission break, and then return" while The Baron Docteur "stands at a podium and reads from his notebook" (Parks 1997: 91). Here, Parks turns a conventional moment of release into an uncomfortable scene of malign witnessing. In the playhouse-turned-anatomical theatre, the audience is invited to listen to a detailed account of the dissection and examination of Baartman's corpse, a practice of such dehumanising proportions that some members might "need *relief*", which the play intentionally denies. As the Baron Docteur points out after encouraging the audience to take a breath in the lobby, his "voice will surely carry beyond these walls and if not", he promptly adds, "my finds are published […] in *The Royal College Journal of Anatomy*" (Parks 1997: 92), from which he proceeds to quote extensive and gruesome excerpts. Cuvier wrote, published, and delivered his seemingly objective anatomical notes to prove that the Khoi-San peoples to which Baartman belonged were the missing link between humans and apes. In *Venus*, this vivid example of nineteenth-century scientific racism is removed from the context of the anatomical theatre and relocated in an actual theatre setting that foregrounds the artificiality and affectation of scientific discourse.

By injecting alienating anatomical terms in ancient Latin into a circus-like setting, Parks parodies and demystifies the authority of Cuvier's statements and of nineteenth-century pseudoscience, a vicious form of epistemic violence that legitimised the enslavement and subsequent segregation of black people by asserting their inferiority.

Through the disturbing dramatisation of Cuvier's lecture and other racist discourses that dehumanised Baartman, Parks forces the audience to acknowledge the subjugating power of both verbal and visual representations of abject blackness. In choosing to portray the story of a dissected black body in the form of a fragmented freak show, she reconciles content and form in a way that eschews both conventional and oppositional modes of racial, national, and theatrical representation. Her unapologetically playful and yet intensely political play employs elements of historiographic metatheatre to deride and dismantle the representational regimes of liberal democracy as well as the rhetorical repertoire of historical anti-racist movements. By privileging metatheatrical representation over historiographic revision, Parks advances her artistic argument that counter-narratives centred on heroic and essentialist portrayals of Black resistance may not be inherently effective in challenging hegemonic narratives of unending progress promoted by liberal democracy. It is only through acknowledging the role that spectacle has played in sustaining systemic racism that a transformative national reckoning about the aftermath of slavery can take place.

**4. Differing Dramatic Representations of Slavery**

The institution of slavery is dealt with differently in the official historiography and national mythologies of Canada and the United States. Although legal and vigorously practiced for over two hundred years in the French and British settlements of colonial Canada, slavery was subsequently removed from the country's consciousness as its political and cultural ruling class engaged in an ideological process of nation-building aimed at constructing Canada as a "peaceable kingdom" (Frye 1995: 251) whose only connection to slavery was as the destination of runaway slaves entering a land of freedom across its southern border. In the United States, slavery was a crucial factor in the accumulation of capital and the rise of the nation as a world power. Following its abolition in 1865, the "peculiar institution" was conveniently constructed as an original sin purged through the carnage of the Civil War, becoming part of a liberal narrative of democratic progress that continues to impede discussion about the enduring role of racism in US society.

These very diverse albeit equally self-indulgent national narratives have prompted Gale and Parks to dramatise slavery through historiographic metatheatre, adapting the genre to their respective national affiliations and theatrical traditions. The pervasive amnesia concerning slavery in colonial Canada led Gale to use the mimetic potential of dramatic realism to stage the life of the most renowned bondswoman in Canadian history, bear witness to the brutal violence that marred her existence and transform her into a beacon of black resistance. By redeploying Angélique as icon, Gale adopts a corrective counter-historiographic approach aimed at rescuing her from oblivion and righting the wrongs of history. While Gale's recourse to the oppositional potential of realist drama is particularly effective in dismantling hegemonic discourses of Canadian history, Parks's skepticism of the

political and aesthetic usefulness of conventional dramatic forms prevents her from writing a revisionist counter-narrative centred on an American slave. Rather than reinscribing an enslaved black woman into a national history replete with black icons, Parks reenacts the spectacle, the transnational display of Baartman's hypersexualised black body "to indicate not that she can be remembered correctly, but to condemn the ways she has been dis-remembered" (Kornweibel 2009: 73). Moreover, she employs a self-reflexive representational strategy that redirects attention from the exhibition itself to the perverse voyeurism of past and present audiences, thereby refracting the violence and power inherent in the act of looking at a racialised subject.

Despite their different approaches to historiographic metatheatre, both Gale and Parks draw on its dramaturgical and performative possibilities to advance a critique of official historiography, destabilise mythical narratives of nationhood, and enable the staging of subjugated black stories. In *Angélique* and *Venus*, their artistic practice aligns with a black feminist aesthetic that posits drama as a site of recovery and recognition of black subjectivities. Theatre becomes a subversive space in which remote and recent, colonial and postcolonial, racist and post-racial acts of physical violence, social injustice, and symbolic obliteration can be reenacted and resisted through embodied gestures of remembrance that foster national reckonings with the legacy of slavery and the continuing effects of racism in both Canadian and US society.

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# *A Stone Sat Still* for Children's Language and Environmental Education

**Abstract I:** L'albo illustrato non-fiction *A Stone Sat Still* (Wenzel 2019) incoraggia i lettori e le lettrici (bambini/e e adulti/e) a osservare, interpretare e pensare in modo critico alla natura e ai suoi ritmi adottando prospettive diverse e riflettendo sulla mutevolezza e sulla persistenza degli elementi naturali. Questo articolo presenta e discute l'albo *A Stone Sat Still* analizzandone la complessità e la composizione multimodale. L'articolo mira a comprendere le potenzialità dell'albo come veicolo per comunicare e creare significati durante le performance di lettura ad alta voce con i bambini e le bambine per l'educazione ambientale in inglese come lingua aggiuntiva.

**Abstract II:** The non-fiction picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* (Wenzel 2019) encourages the readers (children and adults) to observe details, interpret information and think critically about the time scale of the natural world adopting different perspectives and reflecting on changeability and the persistence of natural elements. This paper presents and discusses the complexity of *A Stone Sat Still* as a combination of visual and verbal resources, and it aims at understanding the affordances of the picturebook as a vehicle to establish meaning during read-aloud performances with children for environmental education in English as an additional language.

**Keywords:** non-fiction picturebook, children, read-aloud performances, environmental education, EAL.

> [t]he meaning of a work
> is not what the writer had in mind
> at some moment during composition of the work,
> or what the writer thinks the work means
> after it is finished, but, rather,
> what he or she succeeded in embodying in the work
> (Culler 1997: 66).

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I discuss some findings from my PhD research study on the use of non-fiction picturebooks as vehicles for authentic and contextualised communication between adults and children during read-aloud performances in out-of-school contexts for environmental

education in English as an additional language. The article attempts to analyse and discuss the non-fiction picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* (Wenzel 2019). The main aim is to promote teachers', librarians' and care givers' reflection on how to make the most of the verbal and visual text of the picturebook in order to facilitate comprehension, scaffold communication and promote interaction during read-aloud performances with children for environmental education in English as an additional language.

The first Section introduces some key concepts related to the research study; the following Sections delve into the analysis of the multimodal composition of the picturebook. Section 2 focuses on the cover of *A Stone Sat Still* and discusses the multimodal features of the dust jacket and the hardback cover. Section 3 and Section 4 focus on the illustrations and the written text of the picturebook as separate units. Section 5 discusses the interplay between words and pictures and the affordances of the dynamic interaction between the two semiotic systems in additional language education contexts.

In the field of children's literature, picturebooks are multimodal artifacts in which images, text, design features, typographic and peritextual elements work in concert with one another: the illustrations can show, complete, clarify, enhance what is presented through the written text and vice versa, and the interplay between written and visual texts enables endless interpretations of meaning (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006).

Children's picturebooks can be broadly categorised as non-fiction and fiction. These two categories are neither clear-cut nor easy to define; in general terms, non-fiction picturebooks belong to "the literature of fact" (Kristo & Bamford 2004: 12). In the last decade there has been an increase worldwide in the publication of non-fiction picturebooks for children; these publications offer a creative and critical approach to knowledge and information (Grilli 2020a; Goga *et al*. 2021). According to Pappas, non-fiction literature "[makes] general statements about animals, objects, people, and so forth, because their purpose is to inform" (1991: 451). In non-fiction picturebooks the multimodal interplay of verbal and visual resources presents information and knowledge and by combining different discourse conventions and features, non-fiction picturebooks offer children a comprehensive and accessible way to understanding factual information (Grilli 2021: 24). Researchers have demonstrated that not only can non-fiction picturebooks be motivating and enjoyable sources of information for children (Barnes *et al*. 2015), but they can also promote literacy education (Caswell & Duke 1998) and contribute to improving children's communicative development increasing the exposure to new vocabulary and expressions presented in an accessible and captivating way (Sanders 2018).

Non-fiction picturebooks rely on the devices and conventions which derive from various text-typologies for scientific dissemination, and many contemporary non-fiction picturebooks present a combination of features relying, among others, both on poetic features and narrative conventions; they can offer detailed representations of reality by combining photos, maps, figures and artistic illustrations; some of these picturebooks use the conventions of comics and involve the reader in interactive activities. Some non-fiction picturebooks provide information through a narrative in which events are presented as a story with a clear beginning, a middle state and a conclusion. Many non-fiction picturebooks are non-narrative, which means that they "do not convey stories or construct storyworlds" (Narančić Kovač 2021: 49) but they offer readers structured information.

Non-fiction picturebooks invite readers to co-create meaning and their structure involve readers in paying attention to phenomena, speculating and questioning facts and events (Swartz 2020). By blending aesthetic and informational dimensions, these texts can offer children new ways to approach knowledge and familiarise themselves with factual information on a variety of current and relevant topics and raise their awareness on relevant issues.

Non-fiction picturebooks can be used as an involving and motivating medium for sharing knowledge and information with children during read-aloud events crossing the boundaries between different content areas and educational contexts, in their native language and in an additional language. The non-fiction picturebook *A Stone Sat Sill* (Wenzel 2019) was read aloud during one of the events of the *Telling And Listening to Eco-sustainable Stories* initiative[1] (TALES initiative). The TALES initiative is a series of read-aloud sessions in English as an additional language[2] (from now on EAL) for children's environmental education and informal approach to the target language. It is organised by the Teacher Education Department of the University of Udine (Italy) in collaboration with local cultural associations and institutions. Postgraduate students of the Primary Education Course of the University of Udine (Italy) participate in the initiative as volunteer storytellers: they select non-fiction picturebooks and give read-alouds in English for children's language and environmental education in out-of-school contexts such as the Natural History Museum of Friuli and municipal libraries of the Udine area (North-East Italy).

The hardback version of *A Stone Sat Still* was read aloud by Elena Serino at the Natural History Museum of Friuli in Udine during the TALES event *Stories Around the Stone*, in July 2021. This paper discusses this picturebook as a literary object (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006; Terrusi 2012; Goga 2020; Serafini & Reid 2022), meant to be read by potential readers (adults and children) and shared with potential young listeners during read-aloud performances in EAL. In the field of additional language education, the read-aloud performance is the means through which the meaning potential of a picturebook is activated in order to establish communicative interaction between adults and children (Winters *et al*. 2017: 101; Masoni 2019; Ellis & Mourão 2021). In read-aloud performances picturebooks are the "material resource used in the production of a semiotic event" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 22) and they function as playscripts for the adult's read-aloud performance (Winters *et al*. 2017; Zhang *et al*. 2016). The multimodal composition of picturebooks generates performative possibilities (Mallan 2002; Rowsell 2013): although the book does not offer explicit directions for the storyteller to follow, the dynamic interaction between the written text and the illustrations, the peritextual features, the materiality of the book and the graphic devices influence the way in which the picturebook is read aloud.

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the picturebook *A Stone Sat Still*,

[1] https://yell.uniud.it/en/storytelling/tales (consulted on 24/05/2024).

[2] In line with the recent developments in research studies in language learning and use (among others, Diamantopoulou & Ørevik 2021), the term 'additional language' is used in this paper to identify English as non-native language for the participants involved in the TALES initiative and to acknowledge the plural identity of English in their linguistic repertoire.

recognising its complexity as a combination of visual images, written language, and graphic design features. The peritextual elements (i.e., the cover and the dust jacket), the written text and the illustrations (both as separate units and related to each other) are discussed in order to understand the affordances of the picturebook as vehicle to negotiate, develop and establish meaning during read-aloud performances for children's environmental education in EAL.

## 2. *A Stone Sat Still*: Cover and Dust Jacket

*A Stone Sat Still* was written and illustrated by the American, award-winning author, Brendan Wenzel and it was published in 2019 by Chronicle Books. The narrative in this picturebook is unusually long (it has 56 pages, instead of 32 which is the standard length of a picturebook) and it develops in 24 double page spreads[3]. The author uses an apparently ordinary stone as the main character of the whole book and presents its characteristics through the experiences of different creatures who over time interact with it and the natural context. Through the combined use of written text and illustrations, Wenzel organises, presents and interprets facts about ecosystems and conveys information about various species of animals in an entertaining, inspiring and touching way. The picturebook presents factual information about the relations between different creatures and the stone in a creative way and encourages the readers/listeners to identify with the living experience of other species and natural elements creating affective and emotional connections with the environment.

The hardback version of *A Stone Sat Still* is covered by a dust jacket in which the front cover presents the title and the image of a brown snail on top of the stone against a white background. The snail's colours on the dust jacket capture the reader's attention and provide a contrasting element against the cold tones of the stone, the background and the title, emphasising the absolute relation between living creatures and the natural context in which they live. A trail of slime left by the snail over the stone indicates that although it might seem to be still, the snail is in fact moving, and this contributes to emphasising the steadiness of the stone. The illustrations on the dust jacket coherently combine with the design of the hardback cover and allow the reader to interpret it.

Underneath the dust jacket, the entire surface of the book cover is illustrated to look like the texture of a rock's surface. On the surface there is an embossed pattern of translucent wavy lines, which reflects the light, and reveals a trail that can be perceived as the trail of slime left by the snail over the stone. The trail is almost invisible at first sight, but it has a distinct tactile quality that can be felt by running a finger over it. This implicitly evokes that one of the aims the picturebook is reminding the readers/listeners of the multisensory nature of experiences in the environment.

During read-aloud performances in EAL, storytellers can use both the dust jacket and the back cover of the picturebook in order to set the context and stimulate the children's curiosity towards the topic of the session. For instance, children can be invited to focus on the snail and follow its trail throughout the entire picturebook. They can be invited to

[3] Picturebooks usually do not have numbered pages; scholars generally refer to double page spreads, namely two facing pages, the verso (left page) and the recto (right page).

explore the characteristics of the hardback cover (i.e., the colours used by the author, the embossed pattern) using their senses. Finally, their attention can be oriented towards the stone stimulating children's curiosity towards the unusual character of this picturebook.

**3. The Meaning-making Potential of the Illustrations**

In *A Stone Sat Still*, while the stone is represented in a salient position in the semiotic space of the double spread and remains the centre of the attention throughout, in each double spread the author depicted a different scene: different creatures and elements are represented while they act with and around the stone in different environments as if each double spread represents a fragment from a different story. Wenzel used a mix of techniques that include cut paper, pencil, collage, and paint in order to represent the different materials, elements and textures that can be found in the environment. He also uses a colour palette of greens, browns, yellows, red and blues well suited not only to the representation of the natural world but also to convey positive feelings related to nature. The colour palette includes both warm (i.e., reds, yellows) and cool (i.e., blues, greens) colours. Warm colours are used to depict sunsets, warm seasons and environments and cool colours are used to represent shadows, water, and the coolness of shaded areas. Predominantly blue and green illustrations evoke feelings of tranquillity and calm, while reds and yellows are used to evoke feelings of happiness, excitement and surprise.

In *A Stone Sat Still* there are 24 full-bleed illustrations that extend to the edges of the page without any frame (Sipe 2001: 33). There are 10 full illustrations that cross the whole page spread, there are 4 double spreads that have different illustrations on the verso and the recto, there are 2 double spreads with 4 vertical panels (illustrations that occupy a quarter of a double-spread page), 1 double spread with 3 vertical panels, and 1 with two horizontal panels. The different layouts of illustrations offer different affordances to the reader/listeners during read-aloud performances in EAL.

Full-spread and half-spread illustrations "[suggest] a life going on beyond the confines of the page, so that the beholder becomes more of a participant than a spectator of the pictured events" (Doonan 1993: 81). Thus, they contribute to promoting the listeners' engagement and involvement during the read-aloud performance. In *A Stone Sat Still*, full-spread illustrations also offer to the readers/listeners the opportunity to have an overview of entire ecosystems showing the interaction among various animals, insects, plants and natural elements such as, mud, water, etc.

The four panels in *A Stone Sat Still* have different affordances: some panels focus on specific details (e.g., a small insect crawling up the stone) offering the readers/listeners the opportunity to zoom into items of interest; other panels are "instances of continuous narration" that represents a sequence of events through time (Sipe 2001: 35). These illustrations enable the representation of events and phenomena that require a very long time to take place and/or that cannot be effectively described through words (Terrusi 2012) but need to be shown.

During read-aloud performances in EAL, the illustrations of the picturebook are key in the meaning-making process. In *A Stone Sat Still*, not only do clear and enjoyable

pictures capture the listeners' attention, but they also allow children to access information and make meaning of new expressions. The illustrations depict characters, facts, events and logical relations and offer visual representations of abstract concepts providing additional or complementary information to the written text (see Section 5). Each picture is carefully crafted to depict the behaviours and habitats of different animals, which can serve as an educational tool for children to learn about various species and their interactions within an ecosystem. This can foster an appreciation for biodiversity and encourage curiosity and involvement about the environment.

The stone maintains its shape throughout the book, thus, during read-aloud performances, the listeners can be invited to identify it in the illustrations even though the environment has changed around it. The visual representation of the stone's interactions with the natural world can be used to evoke sensory experiences, such as the feel of the wind or the sound of water, thus creating a more immersive and multisensory experience for young listeners.

The title page and the last double spread page present similar illustrations with a similar design and contribute to the circular structure of the picturebook. The title page occupies the entire double spread, a full bleed illustration showing a riverbank, or lake shore, immersed in fog, the towering shape of the stone rises above the scene on the recto page and the snail is crawling towards it on the verso page where the title is displayed. Similarly, in the last double spread the full bleed illustration represents an underwater landscape; the image of the stone, also positioned on the centre of the recto page, is immersed in an underwater landscape and a sea snail is crawling over it. These illustrations can be used during read-aloud performances to orient children's attention on the unchangeability of the stone despite the passing of time and the changes in the environment.

## 4. The Potentialities of the Written Text for Children's Communicative Development in EAL

In the selection of picturebooks for read-aloud performances in EAL, adults generally focus on the written text they contain, which should provide language within the potential range of the listener's competence or slightly beyond that (Brewster *et al*. 2002; Lado 2012; Ellis & Brewster 2014; Masoni 2019). In a picturebook, the number of expressions in the written text children are supposed to know is a fundamental aspect in adults' selection of a specific book since, during the read-aloud, the audience can rely on familiar expressions and build on those in order to understand unfamiliar expressions. For what concerns the written text of *A Stone Sat Still*, some verbal expressions it presents are within the potential range of primary school EAL learners' competence. There are several expressions that children might have encountered in other educational contexts such as English lessons at school (e.g., the names of some elements and items such as water, grass, house, kitchen and some adjectives). However, this picturebook also offers to young listeners several expressions and structures which might be unfamiliar and gives them opportunity to develop their communicative competence in EAL.

When a picturebook offers new language items, the presence of repetitive structures and repeated expressions scaffolds the listeners' comprehension since repeated patterns

are particularly easy for children to grasp and memorise. Cameron argues that "repeated pattern, or parallelism, creates a way into the story for the active listener, as well as providing a natural support for language learning" (Cameron 2001: 163). Repetitions make the story predictable and they allow associations (Linse 2007; Porras-Gonzales 2010: 99-100); they raise expectations so that children can guess what comes next and feel they can master what they are listening to; repeated patterns also give rhythm and musicality to the narration.

Fleta (2017) and Kaminski (2020) underline the importance of selecting picturebooks that contain repetitions and patterns of language enhancing rhythm, in order to help children become familiar with the sounds and musicality of English and stimulate them to participate in the read-aloud performance, becoming storytellers themselves.

In *A Stone Sat Still* the verbal text has a repetitive, clearly identifiable pattern. In double spread 1 the verbal text is "A stone sat still/ with the water, grass, and dirt/ and it was as it was/ where it was in the world". The same passage is repeated in double spreads 6 and 12 with a slight variation: "and it sat where it sat/ with the water, grass, and dirt/ and it was as it was/ where it was in the world" (Wenzel 2019). The repeated expressions and magical, slow musicality of the language attracts the readers' attention, highlighting the unchangeability of the stone despite the fact that various creatures engage with it and the environment around it continuously changes. In all the double spreads in-between and up to double spread 18, each sentence begins with the expression "And the stone was […]". This repetition highlights the role of the stone as protagonist and attracts the readers' attention towards the adjectives that complete each phrase: "and the stone was dark", "and the stone was bright", "and the stone was loud", "and the stone was quiet". The use of different adjectives invites readers to notice the changes that occur in the illustrations. The use of a patterned structure and the repetition of expressions creates a predictable structure conveying to the reader/listener a sense of expectation and familiarity with the sequence of events presented. The repetition and variation in the verbal text work together and convey both the regularity and the unpredictability of the natural world.

In the last double spread of the picturebook the verbal text rephrases the title and the written text in the first double spread of the picturebook. Noticeably, while the title and the verbal text in the picturebook are written in the past tense, in the last double spread the author uses the present tense: "… a stone sits still in the world". This indicates that the story is still happening and suggests that the events described are current and ongoing.

In the written text of *A Stone Sat Still,* the use of metaphor (e.g., the stone is a home for a family of mice), anthropomorphism (e.g., it is a throne for a lynx, it is a kitchen for an otter) and personification (e.g., the stone is a memory) can help children develop empathy and appreciation for the environment. These literary devices allow adults to introduce environmental concepts such as habitat, biodiversity, and the importance of respecting and preserving ecosystems.

**5. The Affordances of the Interplay between the Verbal and the Visual Text**

Grilli (2021) and Goga (2020) remark that it is possible to identify an international phenomenon in the publishing industry that has intensified in the last decade: authors have addressed more attention towards the use of artistic illustrations in non-fiction picturebooks in order

to offer children innovative creative and critical approaches to knowledge and information (Grilli 2020a: 11). This phenomenon was first mentioned by von Merveldt who identified a "pictorial turn" (2018: 231), namely a greater importance given to the illustrations and to the interplay between visual and verbal texts in conveying meaning in non-fiction picturebooks. As for fiction picturebooks, contemporary non-fiction picturebooks rely on a variety of interactions between words and illustrations; they convey multiple meanings and allow for interactivity, exploration and interrogation engaging the reader/listener to actively participate in a dynamic dialogue (Grilli 2020b: 11).

In *A Stone Sat Still*, the illustrations and verbal text combine in complementary and enhancing interplay (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006): the illustrations show details that are not explicit in the written text and vice versa, thus they fill in each other's gaps and offer a complementary perspective to the readers/listeners. The written words and the images combine to orient the readers' attention to specific characteristics of the stone and invite them to make connections and draw inferences about interactions in the natural world. Colour changes, different perspectives, and variations in scale combine with the verbal text emphasising the variable characteristics of the stone in relation to the diversified environments in which it is immersed, as well as the creatures that engage with it. For instance, for a slug "the stone was rough", and its roughness is represented through the use of zigzag lines all over the surface of the stone; for a porcupine "the stone was smooth", and its smoothness is represented through the use of soft pastel shades of grey.

Grilli states that in many contemporary non-fiction picturebooks "the text is largely at the service of the images rather than the other way around" (2020a: 18). In *A Stone Sat Still*, the illustrations expand or develop the content of the verbal text in an enhancing interplay with it. For instance, in double page spread 11 the illustrations show a fox that sniffs the stone which is painted in various vivid colours. On a black background, chalk drawings around the stone illustrate animals in various colours. The verbal text is "and the stone was a smell". The intangible notion of *smell* is made visible through the use of colours: the drawings of animals in vibrant colours represent the different scents emanating from the stone as they are perceived by the fox depicting aspects beyond the content of the written text. Not only do the illustrations depict the meaning of "smell", but they also expand its meaning showing to the readers/listeners what animals interacted with the stone before the fox. Thus, the expression "smell" in the verbal text and the illustrations work together in an enhancing interplay and potentially allow children to make meaning and to understand the role of the stone as a marker for animals.

Another example of the enhancing interplay between the illustrations and the verbal text is given in double spreads 18 to 24 where the stone disappears under water, but it leaves a trace of its presence that is graphically represented through the use of shades of colour. The illustrations combine with the poetic verbal text, "And the stone was a memory" and "And the stone was always", which invites the readers to reflect on the persistency of the stone through time. These last double spreads of the picturebook give space to questioning and speculating while infusing a sense of mystery, discovery and wonder, and most of all they allow children to experience awe (Grilli 2020b).

The enhancing and complementary interplay between the written text and illustrations in *A Stone Sat Still* generates interpretive space where the reader/listener is invited to construct meaning in transaction with the picturebook (Rosenblatt 1986). During read-aloud performances in EAL, adults as storytellers can encourage children's engagement by inviting them to fill in the gaps between words and images with their own knowledge, experiences or imagination (Grilli 2020b) promoting the co-creation of meaning. Storytellers can invite children to participate asking them questions about different creatures and their interactions with natural elements, labelling or describing illustrations, clarifying concepts and inviting children to make inferences and comments about facts and events (Ellis & Mourão 2022). In this way, storytellers can elaborate on the contents of the picturebook promoting meaningful interaction in EAL among participants and encouraging young listeners to take part in the process of sharing knowledge and sense making.

**6. Concluding Remarks**

As many contemporary non-fiction picturebooks, *A Stone Sat Still* is "designed to give pleasure, and enlightenment, to arouse wonder, and to reveal [children's] capacity for self-awareness and understanding" (Kiefer & Wilson 2011: 291). Through the interplay of the written and visual text, it provides information about the natural world, the ecosystems, living creatures and natural elements yet it is also open to dialogue. It fosters a sense of wonder and curiosity about nature inviting the readers/listeners to observe various ecological interactions.

Its written and visual text as independent units and their interaction between the two semiotic systems make this picturebook a powerful tool for mediating communication about nature and the environment with children during read-aloud performances in EAL. The illustrations depict the diversity of species and landscapes that coexist with the stone, prompting discussions about interdependence and the cyclical nature of life. The images offer visual aids that can help adults convey meanings and encourage children to observe details and make connections between the new information they are exposed to and their previous knowledge. The simplicity of the written text and its repetitive structure can help children infer the meaning of unfamiliar expressions and structures and allow the exploration of concepts and ideas in an accessible way.

The interplay between the written text and illustrations can promote interaction between adults and children during read-aloud performances in EAL, as it allows for creative exploration and understanding of expressions and concepts related to the natural world. As Meek states, "[a] picture book invites all kinds of reading and allows the invention of a set of stories rather than a single story" (1982: 174). Adults can use the picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* as a springboard for discussion about rocks, animals, plants and other natural elements inviting young listeners to construct their own interpretations, imagining and describing the experiences of the creatures depicted in the illustrations. This can lead to the creation of parallel or sequential stories that can extend the content of the picturebook, while expanding the context of interaction in EAL and promoting critical thinking, ecoliteracy and creativity.

Sipe states that images and written text in picturebooks "have a synergic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but

also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these two parts" (1998: 98-99). Although picture-word relationships are foundational to picturebooks, during read-aloud performances the ways of interpreting their relation and developing their meaning potential depends on the adult as a storyteller who reads, explores, interprets, performs and exploits the picturebook meaning potential, and also on the young listeners who are involved in the event. Through the contextualised communication favoured by the picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* and mediated by the adult as a storyteller, children can participate in meaningful interactions through English as an additional language and develop a lifelong appreciation for the natural world and the interconnectedness of all living and non-living beings.

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**Giovanni Ferrazzano**

**Subversive Women in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

**Abstract I:** Discostandosi dalle prime critiche femministe che hanno etichettato l'opera di Salman Rushdie come misogina, questo articolo esamina la rappresentazione delle donne ne *I figli della mezzanotte* per mettere in luce come le principali protagoniste femminili rispondano in modo creativo e rimodellino le strutture sociali oppressive in cui vivono. Utilizzando il modello mutuale di Riane Eisler, l'articolo evidenzia le analogie fra il concetto indù di *Shakti* (potere femminile divino) e la partnership come alternativa efficace di relazione e incontro cooperativo alle norme sociali di dominio.

**Abstract II:** Moving from early feminist criticism that labelled Salman Rushdie's work as misogynistic, this article examines the portrayal of women *Midnight's Children* in order to show how they creatively respond and reshape the oppressive social structures they inhabit. By using Riane Eisler's partnership model, it will also highlight analogies between the Hindu concept of *Shakti* (divine feminine power) and mutuality as an effective alternative based on equalitarian relationships beyond the social norms of domination.

**Keywords:** Salman Rushdie, postcolonialism, gender norms, persona, partnership/domination, Hinduism.

## 1. Introduction

"Women have always been the ones to change my life" (Rushdie 2006: 266), states Saleem Sinai, the narrative voice of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Born precisely at midnight on India's first Independence Day, Saleem sees himself as a literal embodiment of the nation. Since his life is meant to reflect the life of India, the novel presents the image of a country dominated by powerful women, creating a pervasive sense of danger and fear toward femininity. This aligns with Rushdie's controversial portrayal of women. Early feminist critics were "uncompromising in their view that his work consisted of a series of wholly misogynistic texts" (Horn 2014: 1), highlighting how, in his work, "women are invoked to prove a point about social injustices and inequities, and then effectively demeaned […] by the writing itself" (Cundy 1993: 17). On the other hand, many scholars have identified these depictions as part of a strategy aimed at undermining the oppressive nature of gender norms (Weickgenannt 2008). Rushdie's female characters have also been noted to be more negative and less central than their male counterparts: "Rushdie consistently asserts the centrality of men, who are usually positively coded, while consigning women to peripheral roles" (Horn 2014: 4).

In this article, I will argue that, by shifting the focus of analysis from the representation of these characters to their relationship with their own gender roles and relative cultural expectations, profound qualitative differences emerge from Rushdie's seemingly monolithic representation of women. Here my objective is twofold: firstly, to highlight how Rushdie's female characters in *Midnight's Children* always demonstrate a centrality of their own, taking the leading role in weaving the fabric of both individual and collective relationships; secondly, to investigate how the pressing social and patriarchal gender expectations placed upon these characters are either positively or negatively subverted by their distinctive agency and "oppositional creativity" (Hai 1999: 17). Finally, by focusing on the relational complexities displayed in the novel, I will also be able to identify a clear indication of an alternative, equalitarian[1] relational model to which all other relationships are measured, and to clarify how this model harkens back to traditional Hindu concepts of the divine feminine.

To evaluate the different relationship models at work in *Midnight's Children*, I will apply the formulations of socio-anthropologist Riane Eisler which highlight two main distinctive ways of structuring social configurations, partnership and domination, which emerge in all relationships throughout the novel:

> One result of re-examining human society from a gender-holistic perspective has been a new theory of cultural evolution. This theory, which I have called Cultural Transformation Theory, proposes that underlying the great surface diversity of human culture are two basic models of society. The first, which I call *dominator* model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other. The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking, may best be described as partnership model. In this model – beginning with the most fundamental differences in our species, between male and female – diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority (Eisler 1987, xvii).

This framework allows me to map the relational landscape of the main female characters, which is mostly steeped into the 'dominator' model, "an operating social system characterized by an authoritarian and inequitable family, social, political, and economic structure of rigid hierarchies of domination with a high degree of fear, abuse, and violence" (Mercanti 2015: 8). This approach is further integrated by postcolonial and subaltern studies, such as those by Spivak and Chatterjee, as well as by feminist postcolonial scholars such as Rajeswari and Weickgenannt, which clarify the historical condition of the Indian woman and how she was placed at the intersection between a patriarchal traditionalist society and a modern nationalist ideal. Specifically, I will focus on three key characters: Naseen, Amina and Indira, who represent highly restrictive gender roles placed upon them along with the conflicts emerging from oppressive social expectations. They significantly elucidate three different responses to the 'dominator' structures in which they operate: subverting the

[1] "Equalitarian describes social relations in a partnership society where women and men (and "masculine" and "feminine") are accorded equal value" (Eisler 1987: 216).

existing structure, conforming to it or imposing a new one. At the same time they notably offer alternative solutions to their conflicts: the adoption of a partnership-based relationship model between men and women, as analogous in the Hindu concept of *Shakti*, the divine power personified as a goddess:

> In Hindu philosophy and theology *shakti* is understood to be the active dimension of the godhead, the divine power that underlies the godhead's ability to create the world and to display itself. Within the totality of the godhead, *shakti* is the complementary pole of the divine tendency toward quiescence and stillness. It is quite common, furthermore, to identify *shakti* with a female being, a goddess, and to identify the other pole with her male consort. The two poles are usually understood to be interdependent and to have relatively equal status in terms of the divine economy (Kinsley 1997: 133).

While Hindu mythology indicates that "all the female deities are called *Shaktis* of their male counterparts, the words *Shakti* and *Devi* are more particularly or even exclusively used to denote the *Shakti* of Shiva, the innumerable aspects of Parvati" (Swami Harshananda 2010: 94). In their unity, they are referred to as *Shiva-Shakti*[2]. This relationship is exemplified by the dynamic between the narrator, Saleem, and the listener, Padma: a partnership-based model existing in contrast to all other gender relations in the novel, founded on "the capacity to listen, relate, and connect to human beings and the environment" (Mercanti & Riem 2022: 4).

**2.1. Naseem, the Reverend Mother**

To better understand the motives behind Rushdie's depictions of women, it is crucial to examine the ideological construction of the ideal Indian woman at the turn of the 20th century. During this period, the burgeoning Indian nationalist movement began to create its own counter-narrative in opposition to the colonial one, aiming to generate a national identity outside of British colonial discourse. Unable to compete with Europeans in the male-dominated fields of politics and technology, Indian society turned to the domestic sphere, traditionally associated with women, to reclaim a more genuine identity outside of Eurocentric paradigms (Chatterjee 2010). Despite a pervasive patriarchal society, women found themselves "invested with the role of representing the essence of Indian culture and the core of the authentically Indian nation" (Weickgenannt 2008: 66), that is, to be custodians of the tradition and spirituality that defined the national character in contrast to the Western one[3]. However, this new female role had not developed organically but was ideologically driven and strictly delimited by the design of an androcentric society. Generally, women did

[2] In the Indian Tantric tradition, the purpose of the sexual union (*maithuna*) "is to awaken the *kundalini* or divine energy, which is often explicitly identified with *shakti*, the creative power of the Goddess" (Eisler 1996: 27).

[3] "The identity of the country and the nation was often expressed and represented in terms of devotion to the goddess *Bharat Mata* or Mother India, who was inevitably a Hindu. The cult was imbued with moral fervour, and in the process religious, cultural and aesthetic aspects were politicised. The ideology of motherhood could be specifically claimed as their own the colonised and could help in emphasizing their selfhood" (Gupta 2001: 4291).

not take an active part in the contest between colonial and national identity, rather they were the sites in which such contests took place (Rajeswari 1993).

In *Midnight's Children*, the extreme consequences of the conflicting ideas of modernity and traditionalism are enacted by the character of the Reverend Mother, the grandmother of the protagonist. Before transforming herself into the matriarch of her family, Naseem Ghani was the spouse of Aadam Aziz, a character embodying the liberal ideals of the new Indian state. Despite his progressive views, Aadam immediately establishes a "dominator"[4] relationship with Naseem, ordering her to "forget about being a good Kashmiri girl [and to] start thinking about being a modern Indian woman" (Rushdie 2006: 39), against Naseem's wishes. By marrying the deeply conservative Naseem, Aadam attempts to reconnect with what he perceives as the true Indian identity. He seeks to preserve tradition while paradoxically expecting his wife to transcend it, positioning her as outdated compared to the modernity of his political ideals. These opposing forces escalate into violent outbursts, for example in the scene in which Aadam burns Naseem's veils, by which she observes the practice of *purdah*[5].

The "dominator family"[6] established by Aadam is quickly turned on its head: as his liberal ideals are not met and sectarianism takes over the country, his wife grows larger and stronger, while he becomes weaker. What follows is the hyperbolic consequence of Aadam's loss of power: instead of shifting into a paradigm of cooperation, the dominator model established by Aadam is taken over by Naseem. The characterisation of this structure is particularly notable, as the narrator describes their marriage as a space of bloody contest, a condition which brings about a degrading metamorphosis of both husband and wife: "a place of frequent and devastating warfare, under whose depredations the young girl behind the sheet and the gauche young Doctor turned rapidly into different, stranger beings" (Rushdie 2006: 38).

The subversion of the ideal Indian woman is reinforced by its mythical references, as the relationship between Naseem and Aadam contrasts sharply with the relationship between the divine couple of *Shiva-Shakti*. In this gendered representation of divinity, the male figure is incapable of expressing his power without the support of the female creative energy. While this relationship is rooted in harmony and mutuality, in the marriage between Aadam and Naseem these energies are drained from husband to wife, who gradually transforms into an imposing figure: "a prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witch's nipple on her face; and she lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties" (Rushdie 2006: 47). In her new

[4] "The domination configuration is found in repressive and violent societies […]. Despite their many differences, in all these societies the ideal norm in both family and state is top-down authoritarian rule, a high degree of abuse and violence, and rigid male dominance" (Eisler 2021: 1).

[5] Practice that was inaugurated by Muslims and later adopted by various Hindus, especially in India, and that involves the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home. Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/purdah (consulted on 26/07/2024).

[6] "A family in which bonds between husband and wife […] are based on control and unquestioned authority" (Mercanti 2015: 8).

form, Naseem is able to impose her will not only on her family but on outsiders as well. Her image is reminiscent of the mythological Gorgon, as well as the absolute monarch: "she pierced her visitors with lidless eyes and stared them down. Their voices turned to stone; their hearts froze; and alone in a room with strange men, my grandmother sat in triumph, surrounded by downcast eyes" (Rushdie 2006: 51). While Naseem's grudge is primarily directed at her husband, her destructive power is so pervasive that it is expressed in all her actions, including those intended to nurture her daughters. Thus, her character seeps into the younger generation, born and raised into the rigid structure of the matriarchal[7] family:

> Reverend Mother doled out the curries and meatballs of intransigence, dishes imbued with the personality of their creator; Amina ate the fish salans of stubbornness and the birians of determination. And, although Mary's pickle has a partially counteractive effect […] the diet provided by the Reverend Mother filled Amina with a kind of rage (Rushdie 2006: 190).

In her role as Reverend Mother, Naseem takes absolute control of the domestic sphere, turning Aadam's boundaries against him. Building on this subversion of nationalistic discourse and its ideal of the self-sacrificing Indian woman, Rushdie's critique suggests that freedom cannot be constrained; it is either complete or illusory. The only justifiable limit to freedom, he seems to imply, is the mutual agreement between members of a free society. The distinction between this kind of freedom and the absolute anarchy represented by the narrator's rival, Shiva, mirrors the difference between mutually beneficial, equal relationships and those based on "hierarchies of domination" (Eisler 2021: 4) of one gender over the other.

**2.2. Amina, the Wife**

Contrary to the Reverend Mother, who has climbed the ladder of the domination structure of her family, her daughter Amina (formerly Mumtaz) genuinely strives to adhere to what she believes to be the proper role of the ideal wife. After a brief, unsuccessful marriage with Nadir Khan, Mumtaz quickly grasps the peril of deviating from socially accepted norms and is promptly remarried. Given this second opportunity, she fully embraces her new identity as the selfless, devout wife. This new conscience is enacted by the choice of accepting a new name, given to her by her new husband Ahmed Sinai, who renames her Amina "as if to cleanse her from her former marriage and reclaim her as virgin territory for himself" (Weickgenannt 2008). Despite this act of conscious self-offering, the authenticity of their marriage is continually questioned, as their relationship is not based on Amina's affection to her husband but on her dedication to the institution of marriage itself: "why had she married him? – For solace, for children" (Rushdie 2006: 86). Unable to genuinely love Ahmed "she gritted her teeth and set about putting herself straight" (Rushdie 2006: 86) and

[7] According to Eisler's formulation, matriarchy and patriarchy describe "two sides of the same coin" (Eisler 1987: 105); both fall under the model of domination, by their "ranking of one half of humanity over the other" (Eisler 1987, p. xvii).

yet, she cannot forget her former husband. Despite her best efforts, Amina's internal struggle illustrates how her deepest feelings remain beyond her control: "in my mother's opinion, a husband deserved unquestioning loyalty, and unreserved, full-hearted love. But there was a difficulty: Amina […] found she couldn't naturally provide Ahmed Sinai with these things" (Rushdie 2006: 87). Similarly, the mysterious power she shares with other women, though constrained by the patriarchal norms she has internalised, still manages to assert itself.

"Under the influence of painstaking magic so obscure that Amina was probably unaware of working it" (Rushdie 2006: 88), Ahmed undergoes a noticeable transformation, beginning to exhibit physical features reminiscent of Nadir. Just as her parents' struggles have reshaped them into different figures, the conflict within Amina's heart alters her new husband's appearance. Amina's inability to love her husband presents an insurmountable barrier in their marriage, which will never evolve into an equal, partnership-based relationship. Instead, Amina's efforts to conform to her ideal will ultimately break her spirit, leaving her a shadow of herself, consumed by guilt for failing "to save his husband from the pink chitties of alcoholism, for the Brass Monkey's untamed, unfeminine ways, and for the size of her only son's nose" (Rushdie 2006: 218). Her deepest sense of guilt, however, stems from her continued affection towards Nadir. Over the years, despite her guilt building up, her agency and nurturing power continue to shine through, as the takes on a sort of confessor role for her neighbourhoods:

> Amina had become one of those rare people who take the burdens of the world upon their own backs; she began to exude the magnetism of the willingly guilty; and from then on everyone who came into contact with her felt the most powerful of urges to confess their own, private guilts […]. They succumbed to my mother's powers (Rushdie 2006: 218).

This effort, however, is followed by a debilitating accumulation of guilt, which manifests as fog, clouding her vision and impairing her eyesight. The final blow to her character comes when she is forced to temporarily leave Ahmed, who has descended into alcoholism. Confronted with these circumstances, Amina becomes convinced that her life has lost its meaning, having failed to fulfil the duties of her role:

> The Brass Monkey and I were helpless observers, in those days, of my wilting mother. She, who had always been assiduous in the heat, had begun to wither in the northern cold. Deprived of two husbands, she was also deprived (in her own eyes) of meaning (Rushdie 2006: 398).

Significantly, Rushdie's portrayal of this moment is depicted through the principles associated with cold and heat, linking them with the loss of meaning experienced by Amina. This symbolism is reminiscent of the mythical figure of Sita, the divine wife of Rama and the ideal spouse model, who, in her selfless devotion and fidelity, "nourishes an inner heat that both purifies her and provides her with a destructive weapon that can be used against those who might threaten her purity" (Kinsley 1997: 71). Instead of nourishing this inner

power, Amina enacts a deliberate negation of the Self in favour of the external demands of social narratives, by trying to suppress those profound forces that cannot be constrained by conscious effort. Unable to establish a mutual relationship with her second husband, her suppressed energies – her *Shakti* – will ultimately lead to an implosion of her personality into an incurable depressive state.

**2.3. Indira, the Widow**

While Naseem has outcompeted her husband to the top of the domination structure of her family, and Amina has internalised it, the character of Indira Gandhi is the one who strives to impose her own domination structure on the whole nation of India. Her real-life counterpart is the ultimate target for Rushdie's critique, who accuses her of having destroyed all hopes for a liberal India, in favour of an authoritarian government centred on herself and her family. Rushdie's critique is even more powerful due to the way it is delivered – through the demonisation of the Widow's character. To achieve this, Rushdie taps into the ambivalent nature of widowhood in Indian culture.

Although celibacy after the husband's death constitutes the "nonexceptional fate of widows" (Spivak 1988: 302), Rushdie plays on fame of the practice of *sati*, the sacrifice of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre, to conjure images of death, austerity and cruelty. While it is important to highlight how the practice was not widespread and how its appropriateness has been debated in brahmin culture since the Puranic era (Spivak 1988), the British debate around its abolition has made the image of the Indian widow sacrifice far more common than the ritual itself, at the same time serving the colonial discourse as further confirmation of the necessity of Western presence to stop such barbarism: "the powerful negative connotations of Hindu widowhood, viewed in the popular imagination not merely as the misfortune of women but as their destruction of the male" (Rajeswari 1993: 112), in turn build upon the duty of the ideal wife to attend to her husband's health and safety. This is combined with Rushdie's figure of the witch, creating a monstrous villain that haunts Saleem's dreams: "green and black the Widow's hair and clutching hand […] green and black her hand is green her nails black as black" (Rushdie 2006: 589).

Just as Rushdie uses widespread cultural imagery to construct the character of the Widow, so does Indira herself. Founding herself at the centre of a complex network of social and symbolic implications, she establishes an imposing presence in the nation's collective imagination, one that stratifies all aspects of womanhood. She is simultaneously the only daughter of Nehru, a father of the nation; the wife and later widow of Feroze, a renowned freedom fighter; and the mother of Rajiv, who would eventually become Prime Minister himself. Above all, Indira aspires to be a "Mother of the Nation" (Rushdie 2006: 588), reshaping it by her will. In this sense, she "was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be *Devi*, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the *Shakti* of the gods" (Rushdie 2006: 612). All of this is achieved through the power of discourse, a key point in Rushdie's critique, as Indira does not need to impose her role. Instead, she capitalises on the pre-existing web of symbolisms around the idea of womanhood in India:

> The point to be made here is not that Indira Gandhi went about proclaiming herself as *Devi* the Mother goddess, but rather that her swift and cruel actions during the Emergency were perceived to be analogous with the actions of *Devi*, and this was a role that "Mother Indira" did not repudiate (Price 1994: 98).

A *Devi* without a consort, however, is in clear contrast with the balance and mutuality expressed by the divine unity of *Shiva-Shakti*, and thus the Widow's unchecked power degenerates into authoritarian government and extreme policies. As in other domination systems, which "equate difference […] with superiority or inferiority" (Eisler 2021: 7), her objective is to impose her own national narrative by silencing the authentic diversity of the nation, as represented by the titular Midnight's Children and by the hopes for a secular democracy brought about by Independence. Thus, her mass sterilisation program is framed by Saleem as "sperectomy: the draining-out of hope" (Rushdie 2006: 611).

Driven by "a lust for meaning as profound as [Saleem's]", the clash between the Widow and the narrative voice is inevitable, as they are both "competitors for centrality" (Rushdie 2006: 587) in the history of their country. Although Salmeen's deep-rooted conviction of being the mirror of the nation is similar to the Widow's, the distinct pattern of partnership and domination emerges clearly when considering their strategies: while Saleem clearly states his intentions and admits to errors and manipulations in his alternative version of history, his narrative is intended to "increase the sum of what is possible to think" (Rushdie 2010: 15) and is not imposed on anyone else. On the contrary, the nationalistic narrative of the Widow is imposed on the population by means of incarcerations, brutality and persecution. Most importantly, it is absolute, as it does not admit to any alternative as "those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities" (Rushdie 2006: 612).

### 3. Saleem and Padma, the Partnership Couple

Among all the female characters in *Midnight's Children*, which mostly serve to subvert or expose the violence of gender roles in a 'dominator' patriarchal society, the character of Padma is instead based on a partnership model, "an operating social system characterized by mutual respect, care, trust, and equal valuing of the male and female halves of humanity, with a low degree of fear, abuse, and violence" (Mercanti 2015: 24). The relationship between her and Saleem is the closest we get to the image of the divine couple of *Shiva-Shakti*, not only because Saleem is not imposing any domination hierarchy on Padma or vice versa, but also because both parts are equally engaged in the creative act of narrative – that is, the creation of the world of narrative. Despite his own desire to record his life, Saleem' narrative is entirely fuelled by Padma's awe and curiosity, who in turn responds, objects and counterbalances Saleem's sprawling writing. While he clearly states to be "driven by Padma" (Rushdie 2006: 143) in continuing his work, this dynamic is even clearer when Padma temporary leaves him at the midpoint of the novel: "Padma has not returned […] and in her absence, my certainties are falling apart" (Rushdie 2006: 229). Equally essential to this creative endeavour, both halves of the coupled are also nurtured and shaped by it, as they engage in a dialogical dialogue (Panikkar 2007) capable of shaping the listener but, most importantly, the narrator, whose whole life has been characterised by a mistrust of

women: "certainly Padma is leaking into me" (Rushdie 2006: 45). Although fundamentally positive, this relationship is not unrealistically devoid of conflict: while Padma teases Saleem about the effects of his sterilisation ("'What good are you, little princeling, […] as a lover?'", Rushdie 2006: 166), Saleem remarks on "her ignorance and superstition" (Rushdie 2006: 206). Even then, he cannot deny her fundamental role as recipient of his story, which can only make sense as long as she will listen to it – "Padma would believe it; Padma would know what I mean!" (Rushdie 2006: 218) – and in time admits to the blossoming of true affection, upholding her as a "lotus-goddess" (Rushdie 2006: 206).

In Tantric tradition, the divine principle usually refers to the god Shiva, and this unity takes the form of *Shiva-Shakti*: "Shiva, the Absolute, and *Shakti*, the creative Power, being eternally united like word and its meaning – one cannot be thought of without the other" (Swami Samarpanananda 2010: 273). While this seems to evoke the characters of Shiva and Parvati, one must remember that *Shakti* is commonly understood to be a principle and a role, which is identified with different deities depending on the cult in question:

> In the Hindu mythological literature […] this energy is always pictured as a female deity, the *Devi*, as the consort of its counterpart male deity. Each member of the Trinity has his *Shakti* or *Devi* as his consort: Sarasvati of Brahma, Laksmi of Visnu and Parvati of Siva (Swami Harshananda 2010: 78).

In this light, the novel seems to indicate that the true representation of the divine relationship is that between Saleem and Padma, in their role as the creators operating from the outer framework of the narrative. On the contrary, the relationship between Shiva and Parvati appears as an imperfect manifestation, immersed in the world of the narrative. This observation is based on the nature of their relationship, which is intended as an act of revenge against Saleem, initiated by a scorned Parvati. It is also important to highlight how the character of Shiva is entirely oriented towards destruction and materialism:

> 'What *purpose*, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got reason, yara? […] you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die. That's reason, rich-boy' (Rushdie 2006: 306).

Deeply rooted in a 'dominator' paradigm, Shiva's actions demonstrate that he does not represent the entirety of the divinity, whose power of dissolution is not an end. Rather, it is aimed at transformation, rebirth, and re-creation, and while Shiva does participate in the creation of a new generation by impregnating all the women he encounters, "he deserted the bedrooms of all who bore his children" (Rushdie 2006: 571). Conversely, it is Saleem that takes on the responsibility of Shiva's biological child, as well the burden of creation, that he successfully carries out in conjunction with Padma. While Saleem will be denied public recognition and Shiva will become a decorated war hero, he and Padma will find a deeper purpose in each other through their exercise of fiction and imagination, which, according to Rushdie's own formulations, is the true "agent of synthesis or transformation" (Grant 2012: 2).

**4. Conclusion**

Starting from Rushdie's inequitable portrayal of female characters, I intentionally moved away from a mere analysis of the relational dynamics surrounding them, including their own relationships with their gender roles and consequent social expectations, in order to highlight new emerging relational complexities. By applying the theoretical framework of Riane Eisler's partnership/domination model, Rushdie's novel is further appreciated through playing out the extreme consequences of oppressive social norms. In examining the key characters of Naseem, Amina and Indira, three distinct approaches to the domination structures surrounding these women have emerged. While Naseem has subverted his husband's authority and has turned into a matriarch, her daughter Amina has completely internalised this model, spending her life in anguish and guilt. On the other hand, Indira has successfully leveraged her family's prestige to impose a charismatic, authoritarian public figure.

As these characters demonstrate, the struggles placed upon them allow for the exercising of their distinct agency and creativity, positing them at the center of complex relational dynamics that shape families and nations. This in contrast to the existing literature on the topic (Spivak 1990; Ahmad 1991; Grewal 1994), which mainly deemed Rushdie's female characters to be peripheral and passive. Playing by hyperbole, Rushdie has instead designed his narrative to display the punishment of those who wished to impose new rules on women, while claiming the merits of their liberation in the wake of India's Independence. This punishment is represented by a reversal of roles, by which the dominator male inevitably discovers that the freedom he believed he granted cannot be restrained or withdrawn. Such is the case with Aadam Aziz, consumed by his wife, and Ahmed Sinai, who, despite trying to claim Amina as his exclusive property, will never be genuinely loved by her. In the case of Indira Gandhi, the whole nation will suffer the consequences of her authoritarian power.

Despite all these different responses to their environment, the relational model around these characters never changes, the domination structure being always reaffirmed, bearing no positive outcomes but prolonged, sometimes intergenerational, suffering. By discussing these relationships with recurring analogies to the sacred notion of *Shakti*, I have highlighted how the profound mythological intuition of the primordial harmony between the sexes offers the possibility of a different relational model based on the creative, harmonious, equalitarian relationships. Having examined the different interactions between these key characters and their relationship dynamics, I identify Saleem and Padma as the embodiment of the divine couple. They oversee and play around with the creation of the narrative world, standing as an example of a relational model capable of resolving all conflicts thus far explored and mutually nurturing both their relationship and the larger communities to which they belong.

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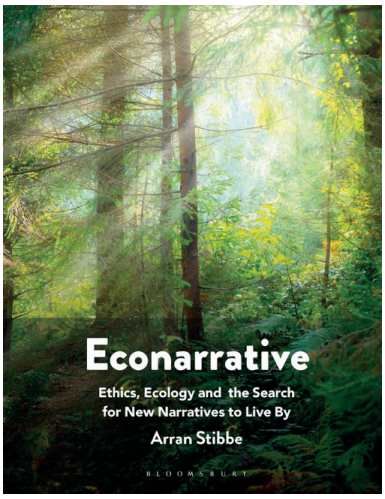
**Maria Bortoluzzi**

**Econarrative. Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New Narrative to Live By**

## *Arran Stibbe. 2024. Econarrative. Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New Narrative to Live By. London: Bloomsbury Academic (1st edition), 288 pp., £ 24.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781350263116*




***https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/econarrative-9781350263116/***

The book is a must-read about the power of narrative and the pervasive influence it has on how we experience reality, and how we construe identities in relation with all living beings, human and beyond the human. The book is well in line with Stibbe's previous books, in particular *Animals Erased* (2012) and *Ecolinguistics* (2015, 2021). And it is an expansion on his long-standing research which offers readers alternative views and practices to counteract those dominant forces that have brought the ecosystems that life depends on at an alarming level of devastation and danger. Throughout his research work, Stibbe has offered insightful perspectives on the way language and other semiotic systems on the one hand can negatively contribute to the problems of Anthropocene, and on the other they can instantiate positive viewpoints, practices and respectful examples through communicative choices. This is the way forward for Stibbe: reflecting on present-day complexities and moving together (human and more-than-human) towards ecocultural instantiations of identities and relationships to live ethically in ecological justice. Figueres and Carnac (2021) would advocate for 'stubborn optimism', whereas Stibbe summarises it with the expression '*care and respect*'.

*Econarrative* offers diverse views and multiple perspectives. The voice of the book addresses the reader as kin, as co-explorer and companion of the complex area in which stories interlace with identities, relations, past, present and the future we all have to face together. Exploring the complexity and variety of narrative, the book establishes a network among domains and disciplines following the principle that we need language and other semiotic modes to instantiate our reality and reflect on it in all life domains and research fields. Narrative (verbal or visual) is constitutive of several research areas and text-types we use to construe, project and understand our world.

With this volume, Stibbe addresses readers from different research areas beyond the strictly linguistic and narratological ones: literature studies, ecocriticism, economics, media and film studies, leadership studies, etc. This includes scholars and students alike since the book is written in a remarkably clear style while issues are discussed in their complexity and subtlety. Tables and summary sections guide the reader through main principles and definitions needed to follow Stibbe's argumentation. In the introductory chapter, for instance, key aspects of narration from different and complementary research frameworks (narratology, linguistics, visual communication) are presented and discussed. Stibbe gives the reader a map of the complex narration territory by identifying fundamental concepts and landmarks on the basis of multidisciplinary frameworks.

In Stibbe's words, econarratives "are narratives that involve not only humans but also other species and the physical environment in interaction with each other" (3-4). The aim is to explore 'econarratives' in their multifaceted instantiations. Thus, the introductory chapter establishes the foundations for the research carried out in the volume through the innovative lens of econarrative principles, ecocultural identities and relations which can "help us rethink the basis of our culture, society, economic systems and our relationships with other species and the physical environment" (4) in a mutual relation of care.

The chapters that follow the introductory one present a categorisation of narrative discourse which cuts across fiction and non-fiction, verbal and multimodal text-types in a dialogue between different econarratives. As Stibbe mentions, the book follows a kind of 'timeline'. I would add that it is a timeline that comes full circle: the analysis starts from texts about cosmogonies, myths and stories of the earth creation (Chapter 2 "Beginning"); then the book moves to the present time of life appreciation (Chapter 3 "Identifying"; Chapter 4 "Emplacing"; Chapter 5 "Enchantment"); and then it looks into the possibility of a better future (Chapter 6 "Leading"; Chapter 7 "Feeling"; Chapter 8 "Persuading"). In Chapter 9 we come full circle with "Ending", narratives about the end of times. This chapter relates back to where we started: new life, new eyes to see it and new narratives to instantiate it.

The keywords identifying each chapter (reported above) are both discoursal and ethical categories, as well as perspectives which open to a territory of interwoven narratives and econarratives to find and experience the path of ecocultural identities within relationships of mutual care.

Following a timeline trajectory, the book is an explorative journey in time (in relation to individuals and communities, human and beyond), but also in place since this metaphorical journey is rooted in our common, irreplaceable, fragile earth which supports human and more-than-human lives while giving meaning to relations of care and support.

Stibbe believes that econarrative and an outlook on ecocultural identities require transdisciplinary approaches and sensitivities: this kind of study cannot be comprised within any single discipline because it "involves different ways of knowing, that include the scientific, analytic, empathic. Experiential, embodied, creative and practical" (235). *Econarrative* concludes by advocating new stories for ecocultural identities of care and respect and thus actively promotes new beginnings.

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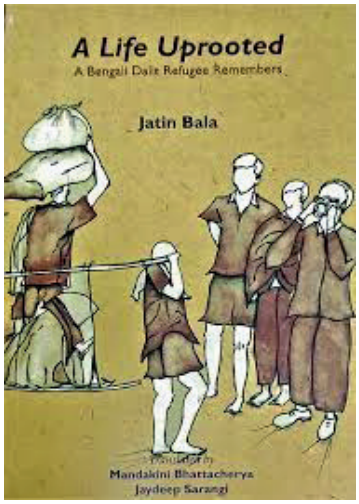
**Sapna Dogra**

**A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers**

## *Jatin Bala. 2022. A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers. Translated by Mandakini Bhattacherya & Jaydeep Sarangi. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 291 pp., $26, ISBN 978-93-5448-404-8*




***https://www.ibpbooks.com/a-life-uprooted-a-bengali-dalit-refugee-remembers/p/58765***

The hegemonic discourse of partition has relegated the narratives of Bengali Dalit refugees to the periphery. Their suppressed accounts are increasingly being found to be worthy of representation and an integral aspect of history. Jatin Bala, a Bengali Dalit Refugee writer's autobiography Shikor Chhera Jibon skillfully translated by Mandakini Bhattacherya and Jaydeep Sarangi as *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* brings to light the plight of the doubly oppressed section of depressed classes that bore the brunt of partition and caste hierarchy together.

Jatin Bala was born in 1949 in Jessore, now in Bangladesh, at a time when the country was beset by communal turmoil. Raised by his eldest brother, who was older than him by 25 years, Bala lost his mother when he was a little over a year old and his father died when he was barely four. The family crossed the border and reached the Indian side. In 1954 his

family settled in the Kunti Camp in Hooghly district. His education began in the refugee camps and all his memories were put together in the form of his autobiography that took him twelve years to write.

Spread over twenty-seven chapters, Bala recounts his experiences in stunning arboreal imagery. Some of the recurrent images are those of "search for roots", "tree uprooted", "fallen leaves", etc. As the translators say in the Acknowledgements

> This book is an act of commitment, our histories revisited. The work we have birthed is a promise for tomorrow. We dedicate this book to all displaced and uprooted people all over the world (viii).

Bala coalesces history and narratives for a compelling representation of the existential and identity crisis of Dalit refugees. The scholarly introduction sheds light on the history of Dalit Literature in India and establishes Jatin Bala's place in it. Bala's life, condensed into four pages in the "Introduction" is fleshed out in detail in the book. The translators call Bala "A shining star in the firmament of Bangla Dalit Literature" (xv).

History comes alive through Bala's story as the book opens with "cries of destitute, panic-stricken people" (2) and Bala recalls how their village was attacked by a mob during a riot and houses were set ablaze. He along with his family and villagers had to shift to another village. Issue of resettlement and relocation in the wake of partition and ensuing, violence, trauma and struggle for bare survival and sustenance are foregrounded. "This is life! People hate each other, men are forced to go in exile – the wounds of Partition push men into pits of distrust, doubt and suspicion" (11).

Bala remembers how many people walked and more people from other villages kept joining the crowd.

> We found some hope for survival, though the thought of separation from our motherland clouded our faces. The tug at the umbilical cord was internally destroying us, our hearts were burning; we could not think clearly. We somehow packed our belongings in a trance lasting for three days and two nights. For one last time, we wept inconsolably and bade goodbye to our birthplace, Jessore district (17).

As a five-year-old Bala was too young to understand the gravity of the situation, but he could not forget what he witnessed:

> Hundreds of people, irrespective of gender, were beaten up mercilessly … Refugees were not human beings at all; they could be dealt with in any way. Young women were dragged from their sleep, stripped and hit repeatedly with boot-clad feet on their buttocks and breasts in the name of interrogation […] Some bled from their noses and lips, some had damaged eardrums, some had broken ribs or crushed genitals, or rulers thrust into vaginas. Some had fainted from the relentless beating; some were trying to endure it with all their might. No one can imagine how low-caste people can be tortured and exterminated by vested upper-class interests, unless one witnessed the ongoing oppression at the Bhandarhati Refugee Camp (170).

At the refugee camp began Bala's tryst with education. Despite working as a child labourer, he managed to get some education that rekindled the fire of protest in him:

> When a person reaches the end of his teethers after facing the traumatic experiences of hunger, hatred, apathy and injustice, he has to fight back […] The people in the refugee camps are no more distressed as before, and hunger, hatred and injustice fail to shake their indomitable will. Now their soul is enlightened by the fire of resistance, the iron will to protest; and a surging wave of vigour to make life forever lingers inside them (214).

The book is also about Bala finding his voice. From a young boy who "lacked the word, knowledge, wisdom, consciousness" and inability to articulate anger to someone who asserted his "opinions logically" (211), Bala's story is sure to inspire as he rises above his victimhood and reconstruct his identity to emerge as someone who would later become the guiding soul in building solidarity.

Apart from the scholarly introduction, there is a glossary of Bangla words used in translation and a subtle yet powerful cover design by Prof. Hrishikesh Ingle that speaks volumes about the plight of refugees. The book sheds light on the interface of objectivity of history and the subjectivity of personal narrative that complicates the relationship between honest chronicling of history and gaps that are left to be filled or unravelled. The book will be a useful referential text for all those interested in Neo historicism, Partition studies and Dalit studies.

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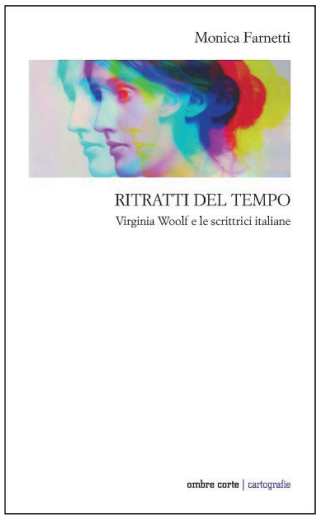
**Claudia Cao**

**Ritratti del tempo. Virginia Woolf e le scrittrici italiane**

## *Monica Farnetti. 2023. Ritratti del tempo. Virginia Woolf e le scrittrici italiane. Verona: Ombre Corte. Collana Cartografie, 140 pp., € 12.00, ISBN: 9788869482748*

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Il volume di Monica Farnetti, *Ritratti del tempo. Virginia Woolf e le scrittrici italiane*, mette a frutto ed espande i preziosi risultati esposti in un suo breve ma densissimo saggio "Anacronismi. Appunti sul romanzo storico delle donne" apparso nel 2018 su *Ermeneutica letteraria*. Già in questa ricca disamina sulla narrativa storica femminile del Novecento sono presenti due elementi chiave che saranno alla base dell'impostazione metodologica del recente volume: l'attenzione per il romanzo storico femminile – in particolare per l'intersezione tra storia individuale e storia collettiva – e la centralità dell'anacronismo "come forma necessaria e vitale del rapporto col passato" e quale "dispositivo generatore di 'somiglianze fuori posto', di consonanze fra immagini, forme, testi, gesti apparentemente lontani nel tempo; di 'rimanenze', 'ritornanze', 'sopravvivenze', 'reincarnazioni' nel tempo di una stessa figura: a riprova del fatto che la storia è fatta di passato ma altresì di futuro, di memoria e profezie, di vicinanza e lontananza ovvero di differenza e ripetizione" (Farnetti 2018: 137).

Si comprende dai virgolettati di questa citazione quale sia l'apparato critico e filosofico con cui Farnetti intesse un fitto dialogo nel tracciare l'impianto di metodo a partire dall'idea di anacronismo: Deleuze, Didi-Huberman, Loraux, cui si deve l'elogio, "Éloge de l'anachronisme en histoire" (1993), di un concetto per lungo tempo demonizzato dalla metodologia storiografica, seppur indispensabile a quel dialogo con il passato e alla sua funzione interpretativa del presente.

Tuttavia, non è solo la filosofia a farsi interlocutrice privilegiata dell'indagine di Farnetti sulla narrativa storica femminile: già Bodei nel suo "Riflessioni sul tempo e gli intrecci temporali nella narrazione storica" scriveva come in realtà la produzione narrativa avesse inaugurato con le sue sperimentazioni cronologiche quello smantellamento di una visione unitaria della temporalità a favore del riconoscimento di "più tempi, più serie temporali simultanee, narrativamente rappresentabili" (Bodei 1985: 341), che la storiografia elaborerà solo qualche decennio dopo. Tra le righe delle parole di Bodei appare cristallino il rimando ai grandi autori modernisti quali Joyce, Proust, e soprattutto, per quel che concerne le autrici che questa ricerca chiama in causa, Virginia Woolf.

Se l'influenza della grande scrittrice inglese sulla produzione femminile italiana del Novecento si può ormai definire assodata lo si deve indubbiamente a questo contributo di Farnetti che, proprio nell'"esperienza del dissestamento del tempo, con la pluralità e la spettacolarità degli esiti che ne possono derivare", presente nell'opera di Woolf rinviene le basi per quella "non linearità e non continuità del tempo sperimentato e rappresentato dalle autrici storiche" (13).

La selezione del corpus si fonda sui tre principali obiettivi perseguiti dai romanzi presi in esame: la messa in scena della già evidenziata discontinuità temporale, delle asincronie e degli anacronismi che pongono in dialogo passato e presente; la capacità di incastonare la storia individuale in un affresco epocale, spesso in forma biografica; la collaborazione tra scrittura storica e scrittura narrativa, soprattutto ai fini di una valorizzazione della presenza femminile per una piena comprensione della storia stessa.

Il ruolo di Virginia Woolf è imprescindibile per lo studio della narrazione storica del Novecento, non solo per gli elevatissimi esiti raggiunti dalla sua produzione stessa – culminati poi in *Orlando*, osserva Farnetti – ma anche per l'attenzione alla microstoria, alle "'vite degli Oscuri' (e delle Oscure)" (19), per la sua "persuasiva modalità di violare la presunta inaccessibilità del passato lavorando su ciò che è in grado di custodirlo […] complici quei 'momenti di essere' in cui, come nell'antica esperienza del *kairós*, passato e presente entrano in 'costellazione'" (20). A essere considerate da Farnetti sono pertanto la trattazione del tempo, la sperimentazione temporale e formale del *life writing* woolfiano – oltre che nel già citato *Orlando* – in *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Flush*, quale punto di partenza per la riflessione sull'intreccio tra storie individuali e Storia. Ciò che Farnetti intende portare in primo piano è "il rapporto tra le donne, la storia e un femminile e specifico 'sentimento del tempo'" (28), complice anche la visione della storia di Zambrano, capace di gettare luce con le sue parole sull'opera della stessa Woolf.

La tesi di cui quest'analisi fa tesoro è che "le donne 'non sentano il 'prima' e il 'dopo' così chiaramente […] e che […] il loro tempo *sia* un presente, pura attualità', dimensione vissuta in 'una quasi costante 'estasi' di intensità e concentrazione […]'" (28, i virgolettati

rimandano a *A propósito de la "grandeza y servidumbre de la mujer"* di Zambrano). L'istante diviene in tal modo "punto di 'tangenza' tra il 'tempo della vita' […] e il 'tempo del mondo'", l'unità in cui "si condensano l'intensità e il senso stesso dell'esistenza", capace di "squarcia[re] il flusso del tempo" e di offrire "il contatto con un tempo intensamente presente e proprio […], crocevia di molteplici temporalità" (29).

Su questi presupposti *Ritratti del tempo* esamina il modo in cui i romanzi storici in esame hanno fatto della discontinuità e della ciclicità i presupposti per "riplasmare [l'] esperienza fenomenologica del tempo" (30), con un'attenzione particolare per le biografie di figure femminili che testimoniano "l'urgenza di ridare alle donne la loro storia (e alla storia le sue donne)" (32).

Le autrici prese in esame sono nove: Anna Banti con *Artemisia* (1947), Gianna Manzini con *Ritratto in piedi* (1971), Fausta Cialente con *Ballata levantina* (1961) e *Un inverno freddissimo* (1966), Maria Bellonci con *Rinascimento privato* (1985), Elsa Morante con *La storia* (1947), Gina Lagorio di *Tra le mura stellate* (1991), Goliarda Sapienza per *L'arte della gioia* (1994-1998), Melania Mazzucco con *Vita* (2003). A chiudere questa ricca disamina è Marguerite Yourcenar, di cui si considera la ricca produzione letteraria e saggistica per la sua costante riflessione sul tempo confluita in romanzi storici e biografie fittizie quali *Memorie di Adriano* (1951) e non solo. Anche quest'ultima – come le otto autrici italiane di cui questo studio abbraccia una ricca produzione letteraria che va ben oltre i romanzi qui citati – ha esplicitato il suo debito con Virginia Woolf in scritti di varia natura che il volume di Monica Farnetti scandaglia per osservare in che modo la riflessione teorica e la scrittura letteraria convergano in questo loro omaggio a Virginia Woolf, da tutte riconosciuta come "colei che con la sua opera ha permesso loro di scrivere i propri capolavori" (131).

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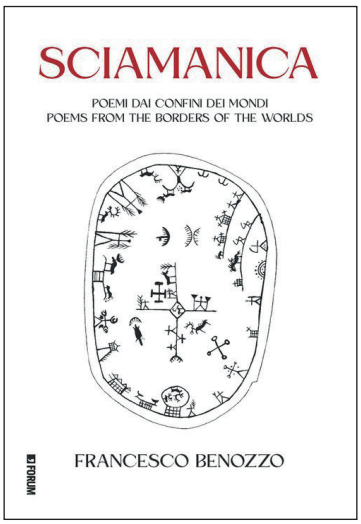
**Paul Kane**

# "Before Time Was": Poetry of Francesco Benozzo

## *Francesco Benozzo. 2023. Sciamanica: Poemi dai confini dei mondi / Poems from the Borders of the Worlds. Traduzione di / Translation by Gray Sutherland. Postfazione di / Afterword by Antonella Riem Natale. Udine: Forum, 436 pp., 23,75€, ISBN: 978-88-3283-371-3*

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In section XIV of his manifesto "*Homo poeta*: Il segreto sciamanico dell'Eurasia", Francesco Benozzo states that

> The Welsh bards, the Occitan troubadours, the traditional poets, the country healers of Europe, the funeral mourners from Ireland to Magna Graecia, the interpreters in written form of the great tradition of texts linked to the oneiric journey, up to Dante and beyond Dante, *are not* "heirs" of the ancient shamans, but, like them, *the essence, the original presence, the evolution* of *Homo poeta* (Benozzo 2015: 18, my translation).

We will want to unpack what Benozzo means by *Homo poeta* shortly, but first we need to note that Benozzo sees himself as a poet of this ancient lineage, a *bard*, in fact, whose poetry aligns itself with a primordial shamanic power whereby the world is called into existence and made manifest to consciousness. "By naming the world", he says, "we become part of a creative process" (Benozzo 2022: 15). Such poetry is fundamentally dynamic, an archaic force that has, in his view, been diverted and attenuated into civilised forms, divested of its potency and forgotten as an essential source of *original presence*. Poets who should be shamans have become mere versifiers. In contradistinction, Benozzo, in *Sciamanica* (or 'Shamanic' in English), collects seven previous long poems (he calls them 'epics'), along with photographs, sketches and manuscript facsimiles, that embody – and body forth – his experience of the world from the perspective of an elemental bard. Ably translated into English by the Canadian poet Gray Sutherland, and with a helpful afterword by Antonella Riem Natale, this book of poems narrates, and seeks to show us, what it is like to encounter life when the 'veil of familiarity' (as Shelley termed it) is stripped away.

This poetic project of Benozzo's has antecedents that are worth noting, as they are not unfamiliar. It has filiations with the high Romantics, as in Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*, Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Where Shelley says "poetry is connate with the origin of man" (1977: 480), Benozzo holds that "Poetry was born in itself, it procreated itself, it was an emanation of itself" (Benozzo 2022: 17). In that sense poetry – which is to say, language – was unconscious or pre-conscious, as it "translated the world around" (17) rather than concoct arbitrary signifiers: "The world was its names; the names of the world were the world" (17). In this, and given his emphasis on the bardic, Benozzo is closer to Emerson, in both the essay "The Poet" and in a number of Emerson's poems. For Emerson, the poet is also the original Namer or 'Language-maker':

> For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius […] The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry (Emerson 1996: 457).

But the process is not simply historical; "for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop" (Emerson 1996: 461). This poetic or shamanic creation continues, "vehicular and transitive", and it "excites in the beholder an emotion of joy" (463-461) – which is why Emerson says, "The poets are thus liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, 'Those who are free throughout the world'. They are free, and they make free" (462). Emerson's representative figure for the bard is Merlin (or Myrddin, the 6th century Welsh poet-prophet), as in Emerson's first poem of that title, "Merlin I", where,

> The kingly bard
> Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
> As with hammer or with mace;
> That they may render back
> Artful thunder, which conveys
> Secrets of the solar track,

Sparks of the supersolar blaze
(Emerson 1996: 1141).

Benozzo is equally attuned to dramatic manifestations of the natural world, but often in a literally grounded manner, since his is a poetry of the earth, reaching back to origins. In the "Epilogo erratico" of his initial 'epic', "Oneiric Geological", he writes:

I.
Stretched out on the grass I look at the valley move
with my ear on the folds of the land
I hold on to the genetic work of the boulder
the pre-verbal etymon of poetry.

II.
September: beginning of transhumance
the continuity of prehistoric shifts.
In the actions of a Neolithic which never died
the word of the poet takes root (52).

There, in the Northern Italian Apennines, the land he is in touch with – again, literally – retains its ontological status as the origin of language, or rather, remains indistinguishable from it. The word of the poet connects with the Neolithic period, as does the seasonal herding of animals ('transhumance') in September. But this is not just a trope for Benozzo; he argues, as a linguist and philologist building on the work of paleoanthropologists, that human language appeared much earlier than what scientists typically assume (between 50,000 to 80,000 years ago). In fact, he says, evidence suggests that well before the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, some *Australopithecus* had the physical capacity for speech and articulate language as far back as two and half million years ago. That somewhat startling claim is presented in Benozzo's article, "Origins of Human Language: Deductive Evidence for Speaking *Australopithecus*" (2016), and more fully in *Speaking Australopithecus* (2017), but other scientists have come to similar conclusions[1]. The reason this is important to Benozzo's theory of poetry is that it allows for the assertion that poetry (as the apprehension of the world) gave rise to language at our very origins as humans. Thus, "*Homo Poeta* preceded *Homo Loquens*. We were poets before being able to speak" (Benozzo 2022: 17). Poetry was the precondition for language.

Benozzo's narrative is one of decline, as we cannot go back to the conditions of post-Neolithic poetry, but it is possible to "awaken dormant qualities and forms" of it: "The poet must not reconstruct the ancient aspect of the primeval word, but awaken it, reactivate it, and reproduce its first demiurgical quality" (Benozzo 2022: 25). This is the role the shamanic bard plays in maintaining a connection to the deep sources of poetry:

[1] See Boë *et al.* (2019).

I came to regain the uncontrolled strength
in a night of infinite nudity
with its premonitions as incalculable
as birds hidden in the foliage.
I pushed myself into the heart of the world
risking my eyes, my song, my very life (256).

This process, he says elsewhere, is "the struggle of poets to redeem *Homo sapiens"* (Benozzo 2022: 20). And yet redemption is not a major theme in Benozzo's work, except for the solitary poet. He is not a humanist, in the ordinary sense of the word, nor is he religious or an idealist. At times there is an almost savage disdain for the corruptions of humanity:

I am still a poet of bones and flesh
who barely survives among his peers,
bipeds who lick crumbled plates of glass
falling in love with each other cyclically
sharing fatuous migrations together (118).

Compared to the high remote places he haunts in order to commune and compose, the "tranquillizing cities" below are where "the poet's song has died" where people lead inauthentic lives:

Down there, among the violated synclines
the accumulation of urban ballast
perpetuates the collective surrogates
of lifeless births and deaths
with no dignity, anaesthetized (218).

In this, Benozzo comes close to the "Inhumanism" of the poet Robinson Jeffers (Jeffers 1948: iv), whom Benozzo resembles in other ways as well: an environmentalist critical of society and atavistically aligned with the natural world. Jeffers famously stated in his poem "Contrast" that he would sooner "kill a man than a hawk", that although "Our people are clever and masterful", still "There is not one memorable person, there is not one mind / to stand with the trees, one life with the mountains" (Jeffers 1928: 143). For Jeffers, Inhumanism is "a shifting of emphasis from man to not man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence […] It offers a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct, instead of love, hate, and envy" (Jeffers 1948: xxi.). In Benozzo we can hear the voice of Jeffers' 'not man':

Even though Apocalypses now abound
on the lips of many, in good condition
cruel, pocket-sized, second hand,
the immaculate words of love
have shown themselves to be interchangeable

like bitter, useless outposts
like emotions and affections that are always the same.
I have a dark, definitive piece of news:
all of you, without exception, are disappearing (226).

He goes on to characterise this as his "indifferent, rough poem" that has "abandoned you, betrayed you" (228). And yet, without contradicting the dark strain in the verse, what is far more characteristic is Benozzo's celebratory renderings of the mountains that inhabit his poetry, from the Apennines to Wales to the Canadian Rockies to the high plateaus of the Faroe Islands, as well as of littoral zones in Galicia, Ireland and nearby Ravenna. Such landscapes always impinge upon the poet in some way; thus, in the Faroes:

Stabbed by the veracious blasts
of the stubborn wind – Stóra Dímun –
I gaze, dumbstruck, southwards to the bay.
Further away, among the ghosts of lichens
in the hallucination of other gulfs,
the tumult of twilight dissolves
beneath scorching boreal feathers (172).

Or, again, in *The Castaway's Shack*, at the seafront, he recalls:

It was a different kind of morning: in the mist
I saw the outline of an enormous wing
rise trickling from the west.
Slanting columns of yellowish rain
marched eastward from a horizon
become less threatening and empty,
fast, noisy, uncanny columns
seaward of emerald archipelagos (142).

Though the trope of the poet's encounter with the natural world is very much a Romantic one, there is nothing romantic about nature in Benozzo's work. It is far too elemental, more like the "primeval, untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*" that Thoreau confronts on Mt. Ktaadn in Maine, where – finding himself stymied by something vast and inhuman – he is "more lone than you can imagine" (Thoreau 1985: 645).

One of the pleasing features of Benozzo's book is the inclusion of photographs he has taken of the places visited in the poems. As accompaniments they are artistically and technically accomplished, whether breathtaking vistas or granular closeups of rocks. Rather than simply illustrating the text, they serve as surrogates to sensitise us to the richness of his verbal descriptions. At times, line sketches do the same, as do the pages of the original notebook draft of "Onirico geologico". Thus, the conception of the book itself has been subtly expanded, to the publisher's credit. Indeed, the production values overall are high.

Another unusual feature of this *en face* Italian/English edition is the inclusion of tran-

slations into Faroese of the poems in "Stóra Dímun", which are set on the Faroe Island of that name – the smallest inhabited one, with "four adults and five children" (170). It is both a gift to the people there (they get to see what the bard from Italy was doing up on those vertiginous cliffs) but it is also a device that further defamiliarises the poetry (in Viktor Shklovsky's sense of *ostranenie*, where our aesthetic perception is deepened). In fact, reading Benozzo is itself akin to a mode of defamiliarisation, since his poems present themselves as a negation of contemporary poetry, a rebuke of what is fashionable and conventional. Moreover, his public self-presentation as a bard is reinforced by his expert renditions of traditional songs and ballads, including his own compositions, on the Celtic and bardic harp (his discography runs well over a dozen CDs – perhaps among poet/musicians only Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen have more). A poet with a harp invariably reminds one of the painting, *The Bard,* by John Martin (1817) or of Philip James de Loutherbourg's illustration for Edward Jones's *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784), both of which depict the imagined defiance of the last wild bard of Wales. That image is now both archaic and contemporary in its revival by Benozzo.

The first five of the seven books collected in *Sciamanica* are largely set in places or environments already mentioned and they focus on the poet's interaction with those places, including the particular effect they have on him. In that sense, they are phenomenological. Here, we are in the familiar territory of the 'lyric I' and almost all the poems in those books are short – rarely more than a page long. This is owing, in part, to the manner of composition, which is described as 'oral'; that is, the poems are first composed as speech – spoken aloud – and then transcribed into a notebook. This method probably delimits the length of the verses, but not necessarily. In English poetry we have two examples of long poems composed orally rather than at the desk, as it were. The first is John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, created when the poet was blind and accordingly dictated to amanuenses (though probably not to his daughters, as is often asserted). The second example is perhaps of more interest: William Wordsworth composed his poems during his daily walks, sometimes pacing back and forth, and only later writing them down (his sister, Dorothy, tried this method herself but found it impossible). That all of Wordsworth's poems are strictly metrical (including *The Prelude*) suggests a physical correlation between his manner of walking and the number of stresses or beats in a line. Perhaps his iambic pentameter should instead be called iambic peripatetic. In any case, Benozzo's mode of writing is similar to Wordsworth's, but without metrical regularity – which Benozzo disdains as "an artificial gimmick" though certainly with rhythms meant to work "below the level of the preconscious mind" (Benozzo 2022: 21). While the poems may have come to him spontaneously, the inclusion of the manuscript pages of "Onirico geologico" shows just how extensive a reviser Benozzo is.

The last two books of *Sciamanica* are somewhat different from the others. "Máelvarstal", subtitled *Poem of the Creation of the Worlds*, is a departure because it engages in cosmogonic world-building, imagining the creation of the universe fourteen billion years ago. Drawing on recent discoveries and theories from quantum mechanics, astrophysics and cosmology, Benozzo takes us on a tour of the very origins of space, time and causality up through the emergence of stars and planets and beyond. In another act of defamiliarisation, Benozzo

coins neologisms, such as "Retalmámor", for the pre-cosmic matrix out of which everything proceeds, and "Máelvarstal", for the mythological memory of all that transpires. This Adamic naming mirrors the creation myths of ancient cultures, such as the Sumerian and Australian Aboriginal, and all subsequent cosmogonic narratives. The book begins as follows:

> I.
> *Prologue.*
> *The void in which energy and matter cancel each other out.*
>
> In Retalmárnor, before every before,
> when the luminescent blue scales
> had not yet frosted over the dragon-fish
> and Ferdheníal did not yet have a name,
> in Retalmárnor, inside every inside,
> in the world without high and without low
> Lundhái the speck of dust
> was dragged away by a sound wave
> and where it once had floated outside time
> there remained a fissure, Litaliódh,
> the scar from which song came into being
> the nostalgia from which everything drew life
> the first syllable of the entire Máelverstal (268).

This epic undertaking can be seen as the culmination of Benozzo's bardic project: having previously rendered the primal physicality and poetic instantiations of what he calls the 'ridges' of the world, he now turns to etiology:

> I felt that it is now very fundamental that, as a poet of the contemporary world, I put myself in the game as a creator of myths. The alternative is the metaliterary one of merely talking about poets as creators of myths, of literature as possibilities of the imaginary, of writing as social and anthropological resistance
> (Meldolesi 2022, my translation).

While the poem can often be bewildering because it is so unfamiliar, we are, by now, used to alien universes, both ancient and contemporary, in myth, fantasy, sci-fi and mainstream fiction, from Jung to Tolkien to Le Guin to George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*. There is something metamodern in this polymorphic, protean mobility that has emerged culturally in our time, and we might construe Benozzo's poem as inviting us into a new universe for a new experience of our contingent existence. But Benozzo's notion of Máelverstal as a primal poetic force (and perhaps ultimately generative of what he terms "world poetry", which is "more like a universal poetry than a global poetry") reminds us that, for him, *poiesis* functions beyond our categories of comprehension. This is Emerson's view as well, "For poetry was all written before time was" (Emerson 1996: 449).

After shamanistic myth-making, the question might arise: "Where does one go from

here?". Without acquiescing in a faux developmental narrative, we might nonetheless see the final book of *Sciamanica* as another turn – post-mythological – especially as it is the most intimate and elegiac of this poems.

"Autoktonia" (Old Greek for 'self-murder') is subtitled *Poem of the Suicide*. Rather than a palinode, this is a poem of self-assertion, very much in line with Benozzo's anarchic individuality:

> I'll decide when, the minute, the hour:
> to cut the head off time
> so I can listen knowingly to my final willing breaths
> and finally make them intentional
> the rambling beats of my heart (340).

This is a response to what he calls "the exile of having come into the world" (352), since none of us had any apparent say about being born. Dying, however, can be a conscious choice. "All I seek," he says, "is the abyss/ the vast, sincere abyss/ where you can start back" (356). This can be done gracefully and as a celebration; "The only freedom is former life/ the only free act is suicide" (378). But there is also a negativity at work as well, a recognition of the pointlessness of human activity and accomplishment, no matter how exalted, and an admission that "I have become infatuated with myself":

> These last years I have continued to write
> not so much because I like my poems
> or because I think I have great things to say
> but simply because if I had stopped
> I would have fatally reached myself (389-390).

Again, this is an *apologia*, not an apology, for there is no lessening of the transvaluation of poetry:

> It's an illusion – also for me –
> that these verses are only a poem:
> this isn't a poem, it's a blade
> it's a knife to carry on murky nights
> to grope for on the bedside table
> when sleepless and wandering underground (404).

The hint here of the poet wandering in Erebus reminds us that the mythological is never far from the surface of Benozzo's poetry: the underground is just beneath our feet. In a poem reminiscent of Jeffers' "Hurt Hawks", the book ends with an eagle:

> The eagle dies on icy cliffs
> not ill, not old, not exhausted,
> but a veteran of sun and storms.

No-one can find an eagle's remains,
no-one will ever be able to find mine:
my autopsy will be carried out on my poems (416).

There is something rueful in that last line, as the examination of the poet's body of work will happen in his absence, while he, himself, will forever remain unknowable. "The death of the poet was kept from his poems" is how W. H. Auden put it in his elegy for Yeats (Auden 1976: 197). Benozzo's elegiac tone is ironically belied, of course, by his continuing to write and sing and live. And yet there is much that is moving in this poem, partly because, as readers, we feel closer to Benozzo as a person. After all, one does not befriend a shaman: they are too powerful and too otherworldly. Woven through the poem, however, is another sort of friendship, or perhaps a brotherhood. In the midst of his self-assertion of solitary autonomy, Benozzo does something unusual for him: he quotes other poets.

Among the few poets Benozzo seems to approve, he mentions Wordsworth, Whitman, Melville, Yeats, Walcott and Milosz. In each case, one can see the filiations, the breadth and depth of the work that resonates with his own. But in "Autoktonia" we get instead a much different group (in the order of appearance): Wallace Stevens ("What We See Is What We Think" and an epigram from *Opus Posthumous*); John Keats ("Ode on A Grecian Urn"); Arthur Rimbaud ("Le Mal"); the 12th century troubadour Jaufre Rudel ("Lanquan li jorn") and T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land)*. Instead of vatic presences, we get snippets of unidentified lyric poets. In what is a long poem of leave-taking, it is as if hidden presences appear to pay their respects, or vice versa. We could read it as an *askesis,* a severe emptying out of voices that have inhabited the poet. As Benozzo puts it:

The dead never leave us in peace:
their names are spread out everywhere
and their faces visit our verses
before going away, each time without eyes,
starting to talk to themselves again
in their own argot, their own dialect
indecipherable but until now familiar
like the rustling of ears in the early morning (400).

We might, however, call it, after the critic Harold Bloom, *apophrades*, the "return of the dead" (Bloom 1997: 139) – though without subscribing to Bloom's theory of influence per se). Like history, the poets of the past are present because they never were past. There is something uncanny in the way these quoted poets humanise the Inhumanism that seems to run through Benozzo's poem of death, and through his work generally. As we have seen, Benozzo is no humanist, and yet to read his poetry, and to listen to his recitals on the harp, is to realise that he is, fundamentally, deeply humane.

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