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Kunapipi 26 (2) 2004, Contents, Editorial

Abstract

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KUNAPIPI

Journal of Postcolonial Writing



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Kunapipi is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Microsoft Word) and should be accompanied by a hard copy. Please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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VOLUME XXVI NUMBER 2

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European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

We wish to thank Syd Harrex for permission to reprint ‘The Precious Thing’, ‘Fruits Instead of Flowers’, ‘Burial’ and ‘Late Afternoon, Granite Island’ from *Under a Medlar Tree*, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, 2004.

Front Cover: Detail of *Big Raven* by Emily Carr, 1931, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.11 (Photo: Trevor Mills)

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.

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EDITORIAL

I have just finished reading Unity Dow's *The Screaming of the Innocent*, a novel published in 2002¹ that reveals the practice and concealment of *dipheko* — the ritual murder of primarily pre-pubescent girls — in contemporary Botswana. It is a deeply disturbing novel, not so much for its revelation of the terrible violence done to the most vulnerable members of a society by those in positions of power and responsibility — the news media are replete with such stories every day of the week; nor by the revelation of a complicit silence that is perpetuated by all who see and hear but will not speak. The silence of the fearful or those guilty either by act or association is again a position with which we are all too familiar, our everyday environments at home and in the workplace offering any number of ordinary examples that corroborate the extraordinary. Rather, it is as Margaret Lenta and Margaret Daymond suggest in interview with Unity, the revelation of terrible guilt by one least suspected that is so shocking:

Amantle looked at the gentle old face before her: was it the face of a man full of compassion and love? The face of a brutal killer? The face of a brave man? The face of a coward? The face of a man who'd held down a twelve-year-old girl as she was being cut up live, screaming, struggling, begging, bleeding? Was he a man who'd reached out to a grieving mother and offered her true friendship and support? Was he a monster? (215)

Yet the shock is not so much that a man portrayed as gentle and sympathetic, indeed empathetic, should be capable of an act of 'inhuman' atrocity; but the recognition of our possible selves in that act. As Unity observes, 'For me it was like investigating the potential for evil in all of us. Naturally that idea would tend to shock each one of us — that it could have been any one of us; that it could be someone we like very much. So who are these people who commit murders?' (52). What is most disturbing is the idea that an act of almost unimaginable violence may indeed be very human — human because it is in fact imaginable — not only as one drawn into such an act by fear or cowardice but as one drawn into such an act because compelled by the allure of horror and its implicit entanglement with power and desire. How then are we to eradicate such unconscionable acts when they lie so close — so deep and yet so near the surface?

Cruelty has a human heart
And Jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secrecy the human dress.

('A Divine Image', *Songs of Experience*, 1794)

The words are William Blake's, for I have begun teaching the Romantics this week — a course in which I emphasise the importance of imagination and empathy in achieving a more equitable, free and humane society. The Romantic

poets believed that political goals could be achieved through poetic means — the latter would encourage and inspire the former; but the cynic in me, or the accumulation of life-experience, recognises that the relationship between the two is neither natural nor easy. Empathy would not seem to be enough. I can imagine the suffering of another as though I myself were suffering, but this act of imagination does not necessarily generate an equivalent action in the real world of human affairs. Literature inspires me but does it also lend me the courage to act? I do not have answers, but I would concur with Blake that, ‘The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind’ (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1793). I have to continue to believe that when literature brings awareness where there was ignorance, and acknowledgment where there was denial, there is at least the possibility of change. Unity Dow’s novel does not end on an uplifting note — the enemy vanquished and the battle won — but neither does it end with defeat. It is a call to action:

Her thoughts flew about in her head as she searched for a reason. Is there a monster lurking in all of us? And if we’re so paralysed by fear, if we don’t dare face this evil, who will heed the screams of the innocent? (215)

Many of the essays in this issue challenge or reveal a challenge made to orthodoxy or unhealthy, even dangerous, stagnation of opinion. They include visual artists like Mary Alice Evatt and Emily Carr, writers as diverse as Jamaica Kincaid, Dymphna Cusack, Albert Wendt, Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Judith Wright, dancers like Elizabeth Cameron Dalman. Many of the essays examine the injustices created and perpetuated by social orders that enshrine hierarchies of power and define themselves on principles of exclusion; but I have chosen to focus this editorial on Dow’s call to action because the horrific nature of the reptile revealed when the stagnant water is stirred is particularly compelling and makes an urgent claim upon us.

Anne Collett

NOTES

¹ Unity Dow 2002, *The Screaming of the Innocent*, Spinifex, Melbourne.