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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 footnotes gathered at the end, 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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Front Cover: Raghupathi Bhatta (Mysore)

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of 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

Why is it that however well-prepared and planned the enterprise its completion is always fraught by last minute (last second) need-to-knows and lost-and-found sagas of essential details? The editing of a journal, as I am just discovering, is something of a drama every issue — the missing reference that seems to stubbornly elude requests and searches; the last minute revision that arrives by email attachment (phew! — unreadable or corrupted — **!!); the phone calls and faxes around the world .... All of which leaves me with a sense of wonderment and admiration for those who produced journals or books before the days of modern technology (think of Blake etching and hand-colouring Songs of Innocence and Experience or The Marriage of Heaven and Hell); but as Blake himself knew, there is no heaven without a hell, no hell without a heaven. The sense of excitement and satisfaction when the book comes off the press with all the gloss of its newness and completeness must always have been the same. It is this sense of completeness that is most satisfying and most surprising, given the disparateness of material in a general issue — yet somehow (with a little nudge in the right direction) the pieces fit. This issue brings together contributions from and on West Africa, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Guyana, Fiji, Northern Ireland, India, Malaysia and Australia. In the manner of Blake, it combines the visual and the verbal, the artistic and the linguistic, the creative and the critical, the theory and the practice.

The cover features the exquisite work of Indian artist, Raghupathi Bhatta. A further four reproductions of his miniature paintings are accompanied by an appreciation of his work by the respected journalist, June Gaur. Essays on subjects as diverse as swimming at the Newcastle Baths, moments of epiphany experienced by Edith Blanche Baughan, and an exploration of the signification of the cross in Jimmy Chi’s musical parody Bran Nue Dae, are augmented by visual material drawn from archival and contemporary sources. An interview with the Maori writer, Patricia Grace is another feature of this issue, as is the work of Malaysian poet, Charlene Rajendran. Charlene’s poem, ‘So mush of me’, published in the special Malaysian issue, ‘lost’ its last two stanzas, for which the editors apologise and promise to endeavour not to make ‘mush’ of any further contributions. Whilst on the subject of editorial practices … a decision was taken to omit the glossary and remove italicisation of words ‘foreign to English’ in Thiagarajah Arasanayagam’s short story, ‘Aunt Yogi’, because it was felt that the story speaks for itself and must be allowed the freedom to speak in an English that accommodates and acknowledges the rights of ‘the foreign’ in a history of English colonisation that created the idiosyncratic relations of Commonwealth Literature.

Anne Collett and Anna Rutherford
TABISH KHAIR

The Rape of Parwana: Mukul Kesavan’s Inscription of History and Agency

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that, with the odd and honourable exception (such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*), the current Indian English fiction boom-boom depends heavily on two distinctive ‘narrative styles’ — a kind of domestic realism and a kind of magic realism. Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth (in *A Suitable Boy*), Arundhati Roy (to an extent) and so many others usually paint in a more or less ‘realistic’ idiom on a middle class domestic canvas. On the other hand, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, Rukun Advani and a few others take recourse to various devices of magic realism even when their framework remains a kind of middle class domesticity.

There may be many reasons why a particular writer inclines towards one of these two tendencies. But there is only one reason why these two tendencies largely define the limits of Indian English narration today. That reason relates to the relationship between the writer and what s/he sets out to write about. In other words, given the ‘Babu’ (anglophone, very urban(e) middle class) backgrounds of these writers, they can only write in so many ways about an India which also contains, say, ‘Coolies’ who are not English-speaking and middle class and often not very urban(e). Or they can only write about so many types of Indians. The advantage of a kind of domestic realism is self-evident: it enables the depiction of Babu realities, with Other realities accessed from a Babu space. The domesticity narrated is always middle class, mostly urban, often English-speaking.

A kind of magic realism, on the other hand, enables the writer to narrate Other realities, without really doing so. Magic realism, in this context, can help the Babu writer avoid certain problems of narration just as much as domestic and conventional realism. For one, it often helps the writer deny final authority to any extra-literary reality, while appropriating those aspects of that reality which are useful and accessible. It also enables the author to present his/her own ‘fabulous’ version of even those aspects of extra-literary reality that are appropriated. The advantages from the perspective of language alone are immense: one can adopt whatever (intra)language one wishes, one can cheerily refuse to be either exact or consistent, one can even avoid confronting the issue of language and representation. It is within the magic realist tradition that Vikram Chandra, for example, can
‘address’ the issue of narratability (complicated by both class and cultural elements in the following extract) in the way he does and get away with it. Here is one of Chandra’s narrators explaining how Sanjay — then ignorant of English — could narrate what another character, the British Hercules, had said in English:

Sanjay hears it, and it is his blessing, or power, that, even though he doesn’t understand what is being said, he hears each word, each sound, a crystal-clear, separate entity .... On learning the meaning attached to these symbols, years later, he was able, then, to discern what Hercules had said that afternoon.... (218)

Of course, at a deeper ideological level, certain uses of magic realism are themselves predicated on the myth of the ‘Truth value’ of non-causality and irrationality — which can also be seen as the myth of the ‘Falsehood’ of the very possibility and necessity of history. As (among others) Terry Eagleton has argued, this myth is not necessarily a redeeming one. While the questioning of official history and the overturning of received systems of ‘knowledge’ serve a radical purpose in an unequal and exploitative world system, the abandonment of the very idea of history or systematic knowledge is a recipe for the kind of subjectivism and vulgar relativism that (at its worst) turns intellectuals into ostriches sticking their heads in the sand.

As the above examples and comments indicate, style and ideology are mutually constitutive. The style of domestic realism or magic realism cannot be read within the Babu-Coolie context in isolation from ideological factors — both being enabled by existing and institutionally situated discourses.

Having noted some of the problems of fantasy and ‘reality’ in magic realism and conventional realism respectively, it is also necessary to acknowledge the genuine elements of narrative concern on both sides of the realism-fantasy ‘divide’. Perhaps this has been best addressed by Mukul Kesavan in *Looking through Glass*, a brilliant first novel that received favourable reviews but was unfortunately overshadowed by the inordinate publicity accorded to some other first novels published in the 1990s.

To begin with, a bid to counter ‘official history’ need not end up in a dismissal of the common body, of human agency — as both Amitav Ghosh and Mukul Kesavan illustrate in different ways. Kesavan’s *Looking through Glass* (1996) is essentially a trip back to ‘official history’ — a re-examination of the colonial and/or nationalist versions of the ‘Quit India’ movement in 1942, ending with the independence (and partition) of India in 1947. What Kesavan achieves in the process is not the dismissal of history, not its erosion in favour of personal anecdotes and newspaper reports, but an examination of the various other versions and elements of human agency that have been left out of ‘official’ accounts.

Kesavan’s narrative is hinged together by magic realist devices: the central one being that of a contemporary, nameless Hindu Babu narrator falling through the lens of his camera into the past, into 1942 to be exact. But while these, and other,
‘magic realist’ devices facilitate the telling of the narrative and make important points of their own, the ‘history’ of the Indian struggle for independence is not excised in favour of a merely personal world. What is questioned is the hegemonic aspect(s) of this official history. For example, the novel tellingly re-inscribes the agency of peasants (in the only extensive act of rebellion depicted) as against the assumed leadership — and lack of action — of Babu students and teachers (108). Such non-pejorative reinscription of Coolie agency is rare in Indian English fiction — though it can be read in the works of other language writers, such as the Bengali Mahasweta Devi.

Connections obscured by colonial and nationalist rhetoric are also restored in Kesavan’s novel. These include occasional metaphors and acts such as the unnamed Hindu narrator-protagonist learning Urdu in 1942 or noticing the important Muslim month of fasting, Ramazan, for the first time in his life only in 1942 (204). They also include more sustained metaphors and narratives, such as the colloborate mixing up of Hindu and Muslim identities throughout the novel, and the very subtle but constant undermining of the Babu (three different Babus to be exact — the narrator, Dadi and Ammi) nostalgia for the Raj, the common Babu tendency to view the Raj as a pre-lapsarian stage for Babu agency. The Babu tendency towards self-protection and isolation in the face of ‘Other’ Indian realities is itself faithfully echoed by the Babu narrator: but as the novel goes on, the Babu narrator not only gets more involved with his ‘new family’ but the narrative itself ends on the symbolic note of the narrator changing from a photographer of (present or past) Indian realities to a presence (though blurred) in one of his own photographs:

I had learnt some lessons too, from all the pictures I had taken and not figured in .... After I lined them up, I twisted the timer and raced for the space between Bihari and Masroor. They were further away than they had seemed through the viewfinder and the shutter caught me on the turn.

But I am there — which is the important thing. In the kneeling row, between Bihari and Masroor, that turning blur is me. (374–75)

More centrally, the entire issue of partition is depicted from a fourth (and often obscured) perspective — not the ‘official’ colonial European perspective evoking the ‘inherent divisibility’ of India in the absence of Eurocentric cohesion; not the ‘official’ Indian perspectives stressing the villainy of Jinnah or the ‘backward fundamentalism’ of Muslims; not the ‘official’ Pakistani perspective stressing the villainy of the Congress and the ‘fundamentalism’ of Hindus; but the fourth perspective of Muslim Congressmen, the men and women who ‘disappeared’ (literally in the novel [47; 243–46]) due to the Congress’s unwillingness to recognise their existence and who remained opposed to both Jinnah’s Pakistan and the Congress’s vision of a socio-politically homogenised ‘India’ (228). In the process, however, the history of India — the sequence of events leading up to partition and independence — is narrated carefully and with the painstaking exactness of a
historian (which, by the way, is also Kesavan’s vocation in ‘real life’). Here, magic realism is not a device to escape from the necessity of faithfully narrating a complex and at times ‘alien’ world, but a device to relate it well and more completely. And in the process, the other side of ‘official history’ is revealed, without dismissing history-as-human-agency. As the time-and-space-travelling narrator puts it: ‘historical hindsight [is an] … unreliable guide to individual history’ (210). This perception of the unreliability of ‘official history’ (‘historical hindsight’ as taught to a post-1947 Indian) is a celebration of, shall we say, ‘lived histories’ — not (as it increasingly is in Rushdie) a dismissal of history and the past, nor (as it often is in V. S. Naipaul) a denial of the possibility of history to the post-colonial ‘margin’.

This revision of history is carried out on many other levels as well, such as in the very different stance that Kesavan’s narrative takes on religion as human agency. For example, as against Rushdie’s narrative of the Quranic verses which could be changed without the speaker (Mahound, in The Satanic Verses) discovering the switch, Kesavan offers a side-narrative in which a similar switch is impossible — largely because both the agents concerned share similar discourses even though one of them is illiterate (44). Such examples can be multiplied.

In general, then, Kesavan’s narrative is deeply aware of the fact that it is problematic to prefer either ‘reality’ or ‘fantasy’ — or, to introduce some unfashionable Marxist terminology, the fact that such a preference is itself a mark of alienation. Human agency — also in terms of human objectification — cannot be dealt with on only the material (often considered the only ‘reality’) or the symbolic (often confused with fantasy) level. Alienation is itself the term that explains why and how the material and the symbolic (and the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastical’) are seen and constituted as unrelated to each other. This explains why Kesavan’s novel is basically different from, say, Rushdie’s The Moor’s Last Sigh (which can easily be read as a dismissal of ‘realism’ in favour of a kind of personal fantasy-cum-fabulism) in its attitude to reality and fantasy, realism and magic realism. Kesavan remains suspicious of both in certain (alienated) forms, without dismissing either. His novel employs and resists elements of both realism and fantasy in its narration (as noted above). However, it is in the story of Parwana, a major female protagonist, that this becomes explicit: as the narrator puts it, ‘Poor Parwana! Ravaged in the name of realism, then ravaged for the sake of fantasy’ (199). The exclamation relates to the rape of Parwana, who has first almost been burnt on a funeral pyre to satiate the craving for realism of a film director and then sexually and physically ravaged by two characters living out their own private fantasies. To this extent Parwana can be seen as a personification (though she is also much more) of human agency, of the physical body, of lived histories, of the present that cannot be without a past or a future. It is this human body and human agency that is ‘ravaged’ by alienation in every field — by alienation as marking a disjunction of the ideal from the physical, the symbolic from the material, the ‘fantastical’ from the ‘real’.
WORKS CITED
Paul Sharrad

KANYAKUMARI

Forget the bird’s-eye view; from a bus window you can touch gutters on both sides of the street.

Pilgrims in beards and black scarves, t-shirts, lungi, faces frolic like ebullient crows.

I calculate the crush, the odds of clawing free hands in green water.

This is it, I think: another ferryload drowned in a news footnote. Will I become history?

The temple guard, ignoring signs for silence, sidles over: ‘This solid stone, all carve one piece’. I nod and seek sunlight.

At Kanyakumari the wind toys with the volume of tourist stalls incessant gusts of filmi qawwal.

A few faithful at the intersection sting a banner, shout a litany antiphonal communist demands.

Six cows, a dog and two pigs pick the slow way home across the guest house garden.
Some comfort from the bustle
and the sounds; the space of a sea breeze
at dusk, the straggle of familiar weeds.

Waiting on the governor,
tailored captains sprawl,
stomachs rounded with seniority.

A soldier guards an empty room
against the sky, his rifle
languid by the tall windows.

The guide looks apologetically at clouds
while bullying northerners demand
the sunset they paid for.
Indian Plantation (‘Coolie’) Experiences Overseas.¹

[We] have ta’en
Too little care of this business!
(King Lear III.iv.32–33)

The slave trade in Africans is perhaps the worst blot on recorded human history, given the trade’s duration, the numbers involved and, above all, its appallingly cruel nature. The effects of the trade persist in various forms into the present, not least in the presence and experiences of Africans now native to the United States and the Caribbean. Ironically, the trade has been enabling in that it has generated numerous studies, autobiographies, memoirs and fictional works, the last not only by Africans (Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips and others) but also by non-Africans, for example, Barry Unsworth (Sacred Hunger), Graeme Rigby (The Black Cook’s Historian)² and the Indo-Guyanese-British writer, David Dabydeen (A Harlot’s Progress). The exodus of Indians, voluntary or otherwise, to labour on British plantations under the indenture system, some heading East to Malaya and further to Fiji, others West through the Suez Canal (opened 1869) to the distant Caribbean, was a newer form of slavery, but it has not drawn the attention of researchers nor inspired writers as much as the ‘trade’ in Africans has done. This article examines some of the available work. I regret I have been unable to trace primary material from Mauritius, but I am sure others will fill in this, and other, gaps. The title specifies ‘Indian’ because many Chinese also went, or were taken, as ‘coolies’; ‘plantation’ because Indians who slaved other than on estates were also derogatorily known as ‘coolies’ (‘don’t visit Colombo harbour, for it is full of sweaty, smelly coolies’ [Muller 1993, 19]) and ‘overseas’ because ‘coolie’ exploitation featured within India too (see Mulk Raj Anand). Why the indentured labourers themselves haven’t left a substantial body of literature is not difficult to understand: most were illiterate, work was exhausting, housing squalid and they were segregated, trapped within the confines, physical and mental, of the plantation. No doubt, there were songs expressing their sufferings and their longings, their yearning for a home made attractive by immediate misery, by time and distance, but these songs appear not to have been translated into English. I fear most are lost even in their original languages.
Historically, the African slave trade and the system of indenture are linked in that it was the emancipation of the slaves in the nineteenth century that made Britain look to its teeming Indian colony for replacement labour. As with Africans, the descendants of Indian ‘coolies’ now form part of the population of certain countries, leading, in some cases to racial attacks: Guyana in the early 1960s, and Sri Lanka ever since independence in 1948 with the departure of the British who had introduced Indian labour into the Island. To cite recent examples, the year 2000 saw increased tension in Mauritius between Indians and ‘Creoles’; parliament in Fiji was stormed and its Indian Prime Minister taken hostage by Fijian ‘nationalists’; and in November, ‘Indian Tamils’ in Sri Lanka were attacked in various towns and four youths held in a rehabilitation centre, murdered by a mob which was allowed entry and incited by the security forces, the latter being drawn almost entirely from the majority group. In short, the effects of the British indenture system persist: indenture is not ‘history’ in the popular sense of being over and done with.

As the Africans before them had done, the Indians under indenture contributed to Britain’s wealth. Writing in 1859 about Mauritius, Patrick Beaton describes emaciated, scantily-clad wretches with miserable, melancholic expressions, and then reflects that these wretches are ‘the secret source of all the wealth, luxury and splendour with which the island abounds .... There is not a carriage ... or a robe of silk worn ... to the purchase of which the Indian has not, by his labour, indirectly contributed’ (Beaton 11). The novel, The Last English Plantation, by the Indo-Guyanese writer Janice Shinebourne, states it directly: it is because of the ‘coolies’ that some became rich and enjoyed a privileged life-style (27). The wretchedness in appearance of the ‘coolies’ Beaton refers to was the product of poverty, of cramped and unhygienic living conditions; the result of the nature and duration of their labour. In contrast, Chandrasekhar cites seventeenth-century descriptions of Tamils brought from India to work in Mauritius as artisans: a gentle, sober, and thrifty people (13).

Simple folk who had not ventured outside their village, boarded ships and sailed thousands of miles to foreign lands of which they knew nothing; had not even the haziest notion of where they were geographically situated. The moment they signed, they became captives, degraded ‘coolies’; and when they crossed the kala pani, the dark waters (in the 1870s, the voyage from Calcutta to Jamaica took about twenty-six weeks), they lost their caste and, with it, their sense of place within a cohesive social structure. The etymology of the derogative term ‘coolie’ is uncertain. It may have been derived from the Tamil word for wages or from the Chinese, k’u, meaning bitter, and li, strength. Demand (in this case for labour) itself does not always create supply, and the chief factor accounting for the thousands of Indians who emigrated as indentured labourers was poverty, at once both extreme and hopeless. The peasants at best managed subsistence living, and floods or drought meant starvation and death. In Kamala Markandaya’s novel,
Nectar in a sieve, Rukmani’s sons leave for the tea estates of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka): ‘There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it’ (68). The mother grieves and the young men speak soothingly to her, as one would to a child, telling her how much they would earn and that, one day, they would return. Even as they speak, mother and sons know it is a ‘sham, a poor shabby pretence to mask [their] tortured feelings’ (68). She never sees them again. Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1935) and Coolie (1936) convey something of the caste-based degradation and the exploitation experienced by the poor within India itself, while his Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) describes and indicts plantation life in India, a prison though without bars where the workers must abnegate their selves in order to endure toil and humiliation. But poverty was not the sole factor impelling Indians to go abroad. Many were tricked into making the voyage and, later, some were also tricked into staying on: Sheik Sadeek of Guyana describes a farewell party for ‘coolies’ returning to India at the end of their period of indenture. There is plenty of alcohol and, in the morning, the ‘coolies’ find to their dismay that they have placed their thumb-print on a document that indentures them for another five years (9–11). Others were threatened and forced into making the voyage, but there were also those who went abroad because they were enterprising, and were determined to fashion a better life for themselves and their children. A few women accompanied their husbands; the rest were a miscellany: those who, for one reason or another, had incurred the displeasure of their family or the opprobrium of their community, and women who had failed to get married, were barren, who could no longer endure conditions at home, and those who had been coerced.

* * *

From earliest times, the Bay of Bengal was a highway of communication between India and Malaya but these contacts arose from mutual needs and were of mutual benefit. However, with the establishment of rubber plantations in Malaya by Britain, India supplied not goods but labour, that is, human beings. The nineteenth century saw the breakdown of India’s traditional economy, and the consequences of this caused many who were innately conservative and immobile, to emigrate (Arasaratnam). The Malay himself was unwilling to ‘abandon his fields, milieu and way of life in order to submit to the sweated toil of the estates’ (Tate 151) — something which can also be said of other countries, Sri Lanka for example, to which Indian labour was imported. In the Caribbean, the newly emancipated African was not going to take on the yoke of another form of slavery. Malayan rubber companies found the Indian worker to be ‘amenable to discipline’ (a chilling euphemism), docile and unused to collective bargaining. In short, they were ideal material for gross exploitation. D.J.M. Tate records that until almost the end of the nineteenth century, a labourer was not supplied with rice (his staple food) unless he was fit to work. It was a practice which condemned the sick and the disabled to a lingering death (Tate 169).
K.S. Maniam is the writer who testifies best to the experience of the indentured Indian 'coolie' on the rubber plantations of Malaya, particularly in his novels, *The Return* (1993a) and *In a Far Country* (1993b). I will deal with these two together because the latter begins with the experiences of the new arrivals on the plantations and moves forward into contemporary Malaya, while the former, in chronological terms, fits into the 1950s (Malaysia gained independence in 1957). Rajan, in *Far Country*, pieces together something of the history of his taciturn father. The latter had been told stories by his father, stories from the Hindu epics of heroes who ventured into foreign lands untrodden by human feet, of those who walked through sandalwood-scented forests. Desperate to escape from the suffocating coils of poverty in India, Rajan's father decides to dare, and makes the voyage. The contrast between epic adventure and the indenture system sharpens the sense of betrayal and defeat.

The ship we came in was crowded and foul. The hulls were rusted. When I drank water from the taps there was only a taste of rust. And the human dung — all over the place. The men not even closing the door. The door too rusted to be closed. The women with the saris over their thighs, to hide the shame. Sometimes no water even to wash, to flush away the human filth. (Manian 1993b, 5)

Realising that they have been deceived and now were trapped, Rajan's near-deranged mother slashes at the rubber trees. 'Brought to “wound” the rubber trees so that the injured sides bleed their profitable sap (from which rubber was manufactured) they themselves become wounded beings, their bleeding enriching colonial capitalism' (Sarvan 1996a, 68). The father remonstrates, 'You want to cut up something ... cut me up. Yes, I brought you to these trees. Made you their slave. Put the wounds on me' (Manian 1993b, 41). Defending himself, the father says, 'I tried .... But people can be wrong .... The price has to be paid. I'm paying it with blood .... We suffered there in India. Now there's only suffering. No escape like the last time' (Manian 1993b, 7). Attempting to escape, they find that they have fallen into a ravine infested with insects (Manian 1993b, 7). There are other casualties, such as the traditional Hindu woman who withdraws into herself and mutely dies, and Muniandy who worked in the plantation's smoke-house. Once he retires, he is ejected from his hut, sleeps on the cement side-walks outside shops and is kicked by the irate Chinese shopkeepers. Reduced to rubbish, his body finds final rest 'beside the huge furnace where the town's rubbish was burned' (Manian 1993b, 22). The experience of the aged, use-less, 'coolie' in Sri Lanka was no different:

They rot and linger
In a workless waste ...
Their hearts uprooted
Thrown on the dust;
With a tin for beggary
A staff for support  
Await the final hour  
To cast their weary limbs  
Underneath the tea  
To the tom-tom’s throb. (Velupillai 1957, 11.)

*The Return*, like *Far Country*, is a first-person narrative (with a strong autobiographical element). Though not set on a plantation, its presence is felt, and its effects persist — indeed, at one point, the family is forced by circumstances to resume work on the plantation. Ravi’s father makes a living by washing clothes, beating them against stones, and ironing with a coal-fired iron. His was an effort to break free from the plantation and set up his own business, but the ‘imported’ plantation economy misshapes and stultifies the growth of a balanced economy, and the ex-‘coolies’ have little or no scope. For example, the carver with his wonderful ‘story-creating chisel’ (Manian 1993a, 4) is unable to make a living and must fall back on physical labour. Poverty brings with it the curse of debt, for the ‘coolies’ on arrival are already in debt to the *kangani* (recruiter, foreman; often the man who had brought them over) or to the planter. Writing about ‘coolies’ on Sri Lankan estates, Hugh Tinker states that around 1917, the average debt of a ‘coolie’ was Rs 70, while the debt owed by some was as high as Rs 200. The highest salary then was Rs 10 a month (179-80). The debt position in Malaya was worse (180) and the ‘coolie’ owed money to the planter and to the ‘ganger’ (*tindal* or *mondal*) who blackmailed him, made false claims and took from ‘coolie’ families the little they had. Ravi’s father, Kanna, is regularly visited by a moneylender who teases, demands, threatens and takes. Plantation-inculcated behaviour persists, and the men who harshly exact respect and obedience from their families, are servile towards those of a higher standing, ‘humble, waist-bending, eye-averted’ (Manian 1993a, 76). Families lived in close proximity, and adults were often dragged into the quarrels of children, first the mothers and then the fathers. Frustrated, unhappy and despairing, the men turned to alcohol, to the *toddy* tapped from the ubiquitous coconut tree, creating the image of the ‘coolie’ as ‘an inveterate drunkard’ (Arasaratnam 70). Debt, deep frustration, arduous work, unwholesome living conditions, hopelessness — these led to alcohol, and drink, in turn, to violence. ‘I was suddenly lifted from the floor and flung against the cups, plates and jars on the kitchen table’ (Manian 1993a, 32); ‘my father caught [my stepmother] and ... choked the curses in her throat. All around, the children wailed. My sister ... went into an uncontrollable spasm’ (Manian 1993a, 86). Defeated by colonial capitalism, the father mutters ‘Useless! Useless!’ and dies a crazed man, talking a mixture of languages which makes no sense. The linguistic confusion is metonymic and points to his total bewilderment. Kannan’s futile goal, like that of his mother, was to own a piece of land, as if by that ownership he could claim ‘a place’ in the country to which he had emigrated — even as Old Thom in an Indo-Guyanese novel dreams of getting back to ‘his’
paddy fields (Lauchmonen 1965). Ravi detaches himself from this tragedy, from this doomed destruction, and forces himself to be somewhat selfish. If not, he too will go down — and make no difference to the life of his family. His sacrifice would have been a gesture, and no more. The title of the novel can be read as Ravi’s ‘return’, his restitution, an attempt to make the pain of his people known to posterity.

A Far Country, as already stated, takes the reader forward into contemporary Malaysia, a country of over nineteen million, Malays comprising approximately sixty-one percent, the Chinese about twenty-eight percent and the Indians eight percent. Nationalism in some countries loses its meaning of different peoples fusing over time to form a nation .... Instead, what rears its ugly head is ‘ethnic nationalism’ (less euphemistically, ‘racism’), and its hatreds and rejections. Those of one racial group assert that they are the natives, the original inhabitants; that they, and only they, constitute the real or authentic nation. The notion of many truths, of a plural authenticity is not countenanced, and so ... to be a nationalist is to be a racist, and vice versa. (Sarvan 1996a, 69)

As Arasaratnam observes, in Malaya the ideal of non-racial politics cannot be pursued because racism is entrenched as the very basis of political organisation (120); it is politically and socially accepted, and the different ethnic groups are encouraged to think of themselves as separate entities (198). Yet, India is a far and foreign country to Rajan, as it was and is to other (Indian) descendants elsewhere: Mahadai Das, the Indo-Guyanese writer, asks, doubtfully, if I go to India, will I find my self? (47). And Naipaul describes the feeling of being out of place, particularly felt by those grown old: ‘They were living in Trinidad and were going to die there; but for them it was the wrong place’ (20). Thus having freed himself from the servitude of indentured labour, Rajan finds himself discriminated against and rejected by the majority group of the only country he knows, the country he fondly (both in the earlier and present meaning) had thought was his ‘home’. Foreign commercial interests have left him becalmed on a shore which is unwelcoming, amid a people who would subordinate and reject him. Similar feelings of alienation and pain have been experienced by the Indians of Sri Lanka (mostly Tamils).

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The descendants of Indians brought to Ceylon (since 1972, Sri Lanka) are particularly unfortunate because the attainment of independence has worsened their plight, bringing disenfranchisement, race riots (and accompanying humiliation and terror; assault, rape and murder) and expatriation. Though these ‘wretched of the earth’ have left little literary testimony (for reasons already explained), C.V. Velupillai has tried to ensure that their lives and experiences are not entirely forgotten. Velupillai, a ‘coolie’ who joined the trade union movement
and then entered parliament, participated in satyagraha (non-violent protest, on the model of that practised by Mahatma Gandhi) against the racially discriminatory policies of the government, was arrested and briefly imprisoned. Born in Ceylon, he never visited India. I have been able to trace only two of his works, In Ceylon’s Tea Garden (1957) and Born to Labour (1970). The stories and songs by and of a people exploited and discarded are simply told but are all the more effective for it: ‘They lie dust under dust/Beneath the tea/No wild weed flowers/Or memories token/Tributes rise/Over their humble mound’ (Velupillai 1957, 2).

The first group of ‘coolies’ was brought to Ceylon as early as 1817 to build the road from Colombo to Kandy (Daniel 31). Later, many more came to work on the coffee plantations (1830–1880) and, when that crop crashed, to labour on tea estates. When reading statements that the government of India came to an agreement with the government of Ceylon, or with that of any other colony, over the export of labour, it must be borne in mind that India was then under British rule. The agreement was between British officials, and the natives played no part in the decision, though they were affected by the consequences. In the early years, except for the short sea crossing from India to Ceylon, ‘coolies’, both men and women, literally walked from the north of Ceylon where they were landed, through the jungles of the North-Central province to the central hill country. The ‘coolies’ were a miserable lot, ill-fed, ill-clothed, travelling through jungles, sometimes without a drop of water, sometimes knee-deep in swamps (Tinker 93). Food being scarce, survival depended on a speedy completion of the journey, and anyone unable to keep up was abandoned, left in the deep recesses of the forest amid wild beasts, serpents and insects, with a handful of rice and a shell of water to meet death all alone (Tinker 173.) The colonial government gave land free of charge to would-be British planters; later, at the rate of a few shillings per acre. All land for which there was no proof of ownership — in the form and manner recognised by British law — was regarded as waste or Crown land, and expropriated (Thondaman 1987, 7). The people of the hill country deeply resented this intrusion but, unfortunately, their resentment and hatred were directed not at the rulers and the plantation companies, but at the hapless plantation workers, the miserable victims of a rapacious commercial enterprise (Fries and Bibin 13).

The ‘coolie’ found himself a bonded serf, burdened with a debt he could never redeem, however long and hard he worked (Thondaman 1987, 78) As on plantations elsewhere, a breach of a labour agreement was ‘tantamount to a penal breach of the law ... a criminal offence’ (Thondaman 1987, 79). The employer was judge supreme against whom there was no appeal, no redress. The workers were, and are, segregated in their ‘lines’, shrouded in their daily work, a grey existence in the vast panorama of lush, green, rolling hills (Velupillai 1970, 1). ‘A family unit of father, mother, two children and a grown up daughter’ occupy a line room, a living space of ten feet by twelve (Velupillai 1970, 1). A survey found that over seventy percent of the children on the plantations were severely
malnourished (Gillard 14): hospitals can offer no cure for arduous and long hours of work, poverty, debt, malnutrition, and unhygienic living conditions. The experience on plantations in other countries was no different: in Old Dam (Guyana), they lived on a mudflat without drains, walked barefoot in the sticky mud when it rained, and the ‘logies’ were choked with large families (Shinebourne 32). On the plantations, the superintendent (the dorai) was a king, a planter Raj, and in his presence, the ‘coolie’ cringed and stepped off the estate path into the drains.

When the P.D. [Periya Dorai; the big master, the boss] came on his ‘rounds’ no special courier ran ahead of him to announce his arrival. Nature itself spoke forth .... A pack of sleek brown and white dogs, with flaming tongues lolling out, ran along the bridle-path. Fast behind them came the thud of the horse and then the animal itself shot into view with P.D. poised in its saddle. (Velupillai 1970, 74).

It is an impressive scene but the description, with its mocking undertone, is not without its subversive element. Power not only corrupts but is also habituating, and the planter came to believe that he was more than mortal, that he deserved such obedience and obeisance. At the receiving end, the ‘coolie’s’ sadness was such that it couldn’t sigh; the pain so great it couldn’t cry, and God was far away (Velupillai 1970, 84).

The songs Velupillai records tell of hardship and loss. The work of the kangany is to see that his ‘coolies’ work:

I dug up the pits
Numbered out to me:
As I stood up
With a broken spine
The jobless kangany
He goaded me:
‘Ai, dig on, dig on’ (Velupillai 1970, 37)

By the river’s fringe my contract —
It bristles with cootch grass.
By scraping the roots out all my days
My life has been cut short. (Velupillai 1970, 41)

Statistics cannot convey the actual experiences undergone by individual, sentient beings, such as the young woman who burns her right hand while cooking. ‘I can’t use my hand and the dorai has refused me work’. Her husband has run away with her sister: ‘Not his fault. We all lived in one room. Fire and cotton can’t be safe together. I pray that they may be well. I want work only to help my mother’ (Velupillai 1970, 111). The woman, hardly more than a girl, shows remarkable dignity and courage, understanding and love. ‘Kandi’ in the song immediately
following refers not only to Kandy, the capital of the hill country, but to the whole Island. Hardship is accompanied and accentuated by a sense of loss:

I lost my dear country
With it my palm grove
In this far famed Kandi
I lost my mother and home (Velupillai 1970, 42)

In yonder field
Strung with pegs
Where coffee plants sprout
I lost my beloved brother (Velupillai 1970, 35)

Exploited, despised, enduring the unendurable, the ‘coolie’ managed to preserve something of his original culture, managed to create some joy, and to fall in love: the human capacity to create patches of happiness in the midst of an otherwise unrelieved gloom was not lost. During marriage ceremonies, certain leaves and plants are placed near the couple, symbolising procreation and prosperity. The life force is represented by seven pots in pyramid form:

The first pot at the base contains water — the life-giver; the second contains rice — the sustainer; the third one contains salt — the leavener; the fourth contains nine different pulses dedicated to the nine planets .... The next three are left empty for the Trinity, namely Shiva, Brahma and Rudra. (Velupillai 1970, 19)

The love songs draw on the everyday, and on the immediate environment for their imagery. (Jaggery, below, is coarse, dark-brown sugar made from palm-sap.)

You are as sweet as ripe plantain
Far sweeter than powdered jaggery
O sweet honey drop ...
I am melting because of you

O son of my uncle.
O sweet jak pod!
O cardamon. o clove
What shall I call you? (Velupillai 1970, 61)

At Peradeniya bridge
The stream fills the pipe;
In the jungle, a lonely palm —
It’s six months since I spoke to him (Velupillai 1970, 63)

Many of the love songs are in the nature of a duet:

There, beyond the tumid river, my swan
You tend your flock, my pea-hen.
If the flood overflows the banks
How [will] you come hither, my love?

I shall summon the carpenter, my lover
To build me a boat of soft wood
To carry me across the river
When the flood overflows the banks (Velupillai 1970, 45)

(Transformed by love, the humble ‘coolie’ promises to imperiously ‘summon’, even as she is summoned all her life.) Velupillai has a special sympathy for the ‘coolie’ woman who, like the man, labours the whole day but, in addition, is also wife, mother, housekeeper. In traditional Tamil literature she is the one who sleeps last and gets up first.

Weary grow her limbs
On midnight’ mat:
Her star-centred eyes
Between wake and sleep
Dream of dawn’s white grin
And the tom-tom’s throb.
Thus her nights enfold
A round of broken days
And empty years. (Velupillai 1957, 6)

Velupillai records (1970, 71) the old plantation saying, ‘What wife for a coolie?’, ‘wife’ with its connotations of regard, protection and exclusive possession. Those within the hierarchy of authority, first the British and then their Sri Lankan successors, casually made sexual use of Indian ‘coolie’ women. It was le droit de seigneur — and of any and all men who had some power on the plantations. At the highest levels, the attitude was either one of ‘They don’t mind it’ (that is, they don’t have ‘our’ niceties of feelings; our moral standards, being a foreign and subordinate species) or, more frankly, ‘We don’t care even if they do’. Those with twinges of conscience deceived themselves with, ‘They come willingly,’ not realising that their alacrity itself was both indication and indictment of the system, revealing the power of a few (starting with the Periya Dorai at the top) over hundreds of unfortunates beholden for employment, wages and accommodation in a foreign and hostile country. As a Colonial Secretary wrote in 1921, the man with power ‘took his pick of the indentured women, and never realised [or if they did, didn’t care] that their readiness to come ... was the most damning indictment of the whole system’ (Lal 43). I was told with pride by a retired Sri Lankan P.D. that of the many women he had made sexual use of in his long career, not one had accepted payment, or even gifts, from him. He did not realise that this refusal was the only way open to them of preserving a modicum of self-respect; of not allowing themselves to be turned into prostitutes by accepting money for services rendered. Besides, they would save up what little sense of
obligation (if any) the P.D. felt for the crises and calamities which would inevitably befall them, sooner or later.

And O, how often
While in harness
Factory or field,
Authority forgot
The original shame
Unknown to Eve
And crucified the flesh!
Mother earth then
Her bosom laid waste
Raped and ravaged
Sighed and sobbed
For lost womanhood …
Their dignity defiled …
[They] lie broken and profaned …
And the tom-tom throbs. (Velupillai 1957, 6)

Ceylon became independent in 1948 and its first act was to decitizenise and then defranchise the entire Indian plantation community (Thondaman 1994, 49). The British who had imported the Indians, sold them down the river in order to secure the political and commercial goodwill of the Sinhalese, the majority group, in whom power was now vested, and with whom they would have to do business in the future (Thondaman 1994, 50). Attempts by Indians to register as citizens were deliberately frustrated by bureaucrats — they were dealing with ‘foreigners’ whom they disliked intensely; those who were illiterate; those who had no proper documentation. In the successive waves of violence unleashed against the Tamils in general, the Indians were included, thus further encouraging them to emigrate.

‘But it was the [Indian] plantation workers who suffered the most. Their line-rooms were burnt, their possessions looted, the men beaten, the women gang-raped’ (Sivanandan 1984, 28). During the 1970s, the tea plantations were taken over by the state, resulting in the forced eviction of the ‘coolies’, in destitution and death on the roads of Nawalapitiya and Gampola and Hatton (Sivanandan 1984, 23). ‘At least 1,000 people were dying every month around the plantations in 1975’ (Kurian 85).

Sivanandan’s novel, When Memory Dies (1997) is an epic work that takes in its sweep almost the whole of Sri Lanka’s twentieth-century history. He traces the failure of the trade union movement, the horizontal division of class being replaced by the vertical division of race; the growth of a virulent and ugly racism; the legitimisation of racism so that, far from being ashamed, racists were proud, flaunting hate and racism as a measure of their patriotism and therefore, ultimately, of their virtue. Sivanandan is very conscious of, and compassionate towards, the so-called ‘estate’ or ‘Indian’ Tamils, the ‘coolies’. In the first decades of the 1900s,
the British used Indian labour to break strikes organised by the Sinhalese, and the policy of ‘divide and rule’ left an unfortunate legacy. The chief source of Ceylon’s income was tea, and yet the workers who produced it, toiling from morning to evening, received but a pittance (Sivanandan 1997, 96). The excuse given, first by British and then by successive Sri Lankan authorities was one of, ‘they don’t starve, and they’ve got a roof over their heads’ and, secondly, ‘They are used to it’ — even the children (Sivanandan 1997, 100). A common humanity is denied and the convenient belief was that the ‘coolies’ are different; they don’t have ‘our’ needs, they don’t experience pain and hardship as we would; they are incapable of feeling as ‘we’ do. ‘Filthy, unclean. They live like pigs, these people. Have you seen the drains? Shit everywhere .... But they are used to it ... It’s we who feel bad for them, but they were born to it’ (Sivanandan 1997, 102). The degradation caused by poverty is used as cause for continuing exploitation and poverty; that they have suffered long, is the justification for prolonging suffering. As described in Maniam’s (Malaysian) novel, some families tried to climb out, but the chances of getting away were (and are even now) slight, particularly in the Sri Lankan context where the very right of the ‘coolies’ to remain on the Island is questioned. Sanji’s father, Raman, sets up a mud-built shop and struggles not to be ‘sucked back into the plantation and overtaken by tea bushes. Already four of his five sons ... had succumbed to coolie life ... Raman’s five surviving daughter were tea-pluckers’ (Sivanandan 1997, 116). Sanji is the last, and the entire family strives and strains to keep him in school. ‘They dressed him up as one dresses up hope’ (Sivanandan 1997, 117): he is the personification of hope but his clothes are shabby and one day when he comes to school without shoes, he is expelled.

The ‘coolie’ victims of racial violence are driven to shame and silence and, contradictorily, to articulation in the interests of justice:

A daughter who had witnessed her father’s murdered body being dragged away by the army jeep to which it was tied said at one point ... ‘take this story and tell the world ....’ And at another point, in the same interview, she pleaded: ‘Please don’t tell anyone .... My father is such a dignified man. He never comes to dinner without bathing .... I don’t want anyone to remember him the way I see him’. (Daniel 105)

When Memory Dies records something of the cruelty and violence unleashed on the defenseless: ‘lorry loads of masked men had suddenly appeared in the middle of the night and attacked the line-rooms, terrorizing the sleeping families and destroying their pitiful belongs’ (185); a starving ‘coolie’ child steals a piece of bread, is detected and beaten: ‘Yesterday they stole our land, today they steal our food’, despite the argument that ‘it was the British who took our land’ (247). It also describes the forceful ‘repatriation’ of the Indians. The term ‘repatriation’ is a misnomer since many of those expelled had lived for generations on the Island: it was to them a painful expatriation, for they had given their lives to and on the estates. ‘Look at those tea-bushes .... That’s not leaves and buds they’re plucking
you know, our women and children, but bits of their lives' (259). Velupillai’s treatment of forced expatriation is poignant in its indirection: Muttiah is forced to ‘return’ to India, leaving behind Sooty, the dog which he and his now-deceased mother had loved: ‘The moaning of Sooty came from the distance and faded away like the cry of a child in the night. Muttiah felt as if it came from the grave of his mother ... a handful of dusting calling out to him from under the tea bushes’ (Velupillai 1970, 89). Yvonne Fries and Thomas Bibin relate something of the human tragedy involved in the expatriation of Indian labour. As with slavery, families are split, some members being permitted to stay, others forcibly expelled, arriving in an India that was totally foreign to them and where they knew no one. The ‘fate of the Indian expatriates is a human tragedy to an extent yet to be realised. Nine out of ten expatriates end up as migrant seasonal labour, beggars or are untimely dead’ (3). It is another story that waits, and deserves, to be told. Truly, Indian ‘coolies’ in Sri Lanka have suffered to an extreme.

What man dare speak
[Of] His fettered, unbroken
Days of drudgery —
That sole legacy
From sire to son!
Poverty and shame
Bound to the cart wheel —
A beast of burden
Cowed and bent
To a lesser beast;
An outcast
From the mainland
And here a helot
Stripped of his name,
A reproach and danger
To his kin .... (Velupillai 1957, 8)

To stress similarities in the ‘coolie’ experience, it should be noted that those who returned voluntarily to India from other British colonies fared little better, as Marianne Ramesar records (1996).

The suffering of those of Indian descent in Sri Lanka is not a thing of the past. Carl Muller reports that estate workers are seen as human discards. Those who attempt to leave the estate and estate life, are forced by failure to return. Fifty-two percent of the children of ‘Indian’ workers are underweight; forty percent of income is spent on alcohol and betel leaf (a mild narcotic); there is no electricity; little space; living quarters are leaky; and without proper sanitation facilities, garbage disposal and maintenance (Muller 2000).

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In Fiji, the racial divide between Indians and Fijians, the suspicion, fear and hostility, led to the military coup of 1987 which prompted many Indians to emigrate. They, like their parents and grandparents, had been born in Fiji; had believed and felt it to be home, but suddenly home was no longer home. This colonial legacy is similar to that experienced by descendants of indentured labour in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. In Satendra Nandan’s *The Wounded Sea* (1991), Fijian Indians are like Rama in the epic *Ramayana* who, on the eve of his coronation, in an abrupt reversal, is sent into exile. But to Rama and his wife, there was a triumphant return; to the Indians, a dispersal and, to those who remained, insecurity and unease. By law, most of the land is reserved for Fijians, and though the first batch of indentured workers reached Fiji in 1879, their children cannot own land; cannot have the claims and the feelings which flow from such rights. ‘Coolies’ do not make history: they merely suffer it. As Nandan shows, suffering without hope, many degenerate into alcoholism, crudity and violence (77). Nandan is a contemporary writer (born 1939), and for an account of the earlier experience of indenture in Fiji, one must turn to Totaram Sanadhyā’s *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands* and *The Story of the Haunted Line*, both now in one volume. Sanadhyā arrived in Fiji in 1893, at the age of seventeen, returned to India in 1914 and published these works which were subsequently translated into several Indian languages. Even when an adult, the remembrance of the poverty his parents endured in India, brought ‘clouds of sorrow’ (32) to him. He ran away from his widowed mother (because he was unable to be of help, and didn’t want to be an additional burden on her) and met up with an *arkati* or recruiter. The *arkati* trained their victims to answer ‘Yes’ to all questions, and the latter found they had ‘voluntarily’ bound themselves to go to Fiji, a land whose very name they had not heard before. Those recruited were known as *grimityas*, because they had signed a *grimit* — an Indianisation of ‘agreement’. The trapped grimityas, prior to embarkation (Sanadhyā’s voyage took three months and twelve days) were forbidden to speak to each other, in case information was exchanged and the true nature of things discovered. The food given was so hard it first had to be soaked in water. On arrival, they were immediately surrounded by police, indicating their captive status. They woke at four in the morning, and were working by five. An impossible amount of work was set, and failure to fulfil the quota meant a fine. This last reduced the grimitya’s pay and set him down the road into inextricable debt. The government inspectors who came round were white; they stayed with the planters, were their guests and wrote positive reports. Women suffered the most, getting up at three-thirty in the morning to cook; working ten hours, and returning home to cook and clean. There was ‘a corpse-like shading to their faces’ (61). A woman desired by a man with power was assigned work in a lonely place so that she could be raped. One woman, forced back to work only three days after giving birth and being unable to cope, was so badly beaten that she ended up mentally deranged. Brij Lal records cases such as an English overseer pouring
acid on the penis of a grimitya; of a woman who just after giving birth was put to work breaking stones, and when unable to complete the task, being beaten senseless (41). Since the ratio of women was about thirty to every hundred men, prostitution, infidelity, suspicion and violence were rife. In The Story of the Haunted Line, women lament their fate, comfort each other and resume work (119): work was both destroyer and distractor. The author himself was tempted to commit suicide but was stopped by thoughts of his mother’s love for him, and of his love for, and duty towards, her.

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If the ancestors are texts waiting to be written (Dabydeen 1988, 12) then it is the children of those who went West, to the Caribbean and to Guyana — who have done the most to commemorate, to indict, to celebrate: I have already referred to several works from this region. The ‘coolie’ mother in Dabydeen’s work, Coolie Odyssey, has incredible courage; is iron-like in her determination that her son will have a better life, and so, though her feet and hands are cracked, though she’s coughing blood, she continues to labour.

The ‘discovery’ of the Caribbean was an unmitigated disaster for the Amerindians, the autochthonous inhabitants, for it marked their extinction. This was followed by the importation of Africans as slaves and, with abolition, there began the new form of slavery, indenture. Between 1838 and 1917, about over half a million Indians were shipped out to the Caribbean and to the northern coasts of the South American continent (Dabydeen 1996, 1). Yet this region is generally thought of as being African, the Indians and their contribution being overlooked (Mangru vii). Similar to Maniam’s description of the voyage to Malaya, Mangru cites evidence that, on board ship, the ‘coolies’ received but one meal a day. The absence of toilets for the exclusive use of women resulted in extreme embarrassment to them, not to mention vulnerability to sexual assault (26). The spirit of slavery but newly abolished, governed employer-employee relations, and it was convenient for the former — as with ruling classes all over — to believe that the workers were contented, even happy, with their degraded status and miserable lives. The ‘coolies’ were restricted to the plantation, their movement curtailed by law. Generally, the aim was to create a sense of helplessness, despair and dependence. Laws, rights and entitlements were not explained to the ‘coolies’: the planter, the overseer and others with power, were the law, and what they said was the law. Civil contracts were enforced by criminal proceedings. Mangru concludes that indenture (particularly in the early years) was slavery in a disguised form. He cites the rate of suicide for 1902–1912 as averaging 400 per every million in Trinidad and 926 in Fiji, while for the whole of British India, it was a mere 51 (Mangru 114) The wealth created by the ‘coolie’ went into British coffers; into the pockets of plantation owners and their managers: very little was given back to the actual producers of wealth. Those who opted out of indenture and remained
in the colony, found life difficult because it was not in the interests of the colonial government, of plantation owners and managers: a thriving peasantry would make cheap, exploitable labour hard to come by. Further, as in Fiji and Sri Lanka, the numbers imported, the expropriation of land in the latter, the separation between groups (encouraged, if not enforced) led to racial tension (see, for example, Shewcharan).

Clem Seecharan confirms much of the above in his study. For example, he writes that where the 'coolies' lived, 'the logies' (in Sri Lanka, the 'coolie' 'lines') were known as 'the nigger yard' (67): cramped, unhygienic places breeding ill health and strife. These were the 'homes' to which the exhausted 'coolies' returned. They were cowed into silence by the fear of being dismissed, evicted or being assigned more arduous and unpleasant work. The 'coolie' lines or logies are the most enduring symbol of plantation life (74). However, Seecharan also points out that oppression, degradation and despair, though axiomatic, are not the complete picture: 'The elaborate rituals, the lavish preparation, and the informal, joyful participation in festivals, like Holi and Diwali, fed a sense of community .... The Indians were irrepressible, their wit was spontaneous, they were alive. To paint a picture of darkness, of a pervasive melancholy, is a distortion' (73). This is true of the 'coolie' experience in general as, for example, some of the songs Velupillai has recorded attest. Rooplall Monar's Backdam People (1985), rather like Velupillai's work, describes the daily life of the 'coolies', but is different in that the focus is on escapades, mischief and infidelities. Despite the strong picaresque element, there is the unmistakable presence of the plantation, and of the reality of plantation (or estate) life: 'backdam' itself refers to the distant part of the estate. Those assigned to work there had to walk four or five miles in the darkness, getting up extra early to begin work on time. The village teacher must accept that, dull or intelligent, all his pupils end up working as 'coolies'.

Two significant fictional works from this region are Harold Ladoo's No Pain Like This Body (1972) and David Dabydeen's The Counting House (1996). The former is set in Trinidad and told through the perspective of a child. It is August, the rainy season, and the family live in a hut with a leaking roof and muddy floors. With the rain, the ants and scorpions come out of hiding, and outside, in the rice fields and forests, there are snakes. The father has given up altogether and turned alcoholic. His despair finds vent in gross crudity and appalling brutality meted out to his wife and children. The emaciated woman endures and struggles, determined that her children will, one day, 'come man and woman' (1972, 41). But a desperate poverty and unhygienic conditions; ill health, constant beatings and the lack of care; sorrow and grief, drive her to insanity and death. The father may rant and rampage; be foul, lie, brutalise, but it is the mother and grandmother, their courage born of love, that one remembers. There is nothing shy and timid in them (Espinet 81). When on the verge of despair, the grandmother beats her drum: it is a call to God; a warding off of evil; defiance and celebration. Repeatedly, the
two women ask, ‘Where you is God?’ (Ladoo 49); ‘Which part in dat sky you is God?’ (Ladoo 71) but God calmly continues to watch the sorry soap opera of human lives. It is a searing novel, one that makes the reader flinch and, once read, is difficult to forget. (In 1973, the author was attacked and killed in Trinidad, aged twenty-eight.)

Dabydeen’s novel covers two phases of the indenture experience — recruitment and servitude — and briefly mentions the third — the return. Rohini, aged seventeen, and Vidia, twenty, marry and, a year later (1857) sail to Guiana. Clem Seecharan writes (xxiii) that the infamous recruiter still excites the imagination of local Indians, and in Dabydeen’s novel, the recruiter slinks at the edges of the village; he entices, traps and transports. Of the two, it is Rohini, the wife, who persuades her husband to emigrate. She is the one with enterprise and determination. On arrival, they find that they have sold themselves into virtual slavery. As I suggested in a brief review of the novel (1997), Vidia’s inability to father a child points to a wider impotency, given the context of indenture and ‘cooliehood’. Disappointed, Rohini begins to admire imperial power, purpose and achievement. She is made pregnant by Gladstone (Gladstone) and steals the money Vidia had collected (tiny sums by tiny sums, through arduous toil) to pay for the abortion. Rohini ends deranged and Vidia drowns on the return voyage to India: ironically, his intention was to become a recruiter. Often, the victims of cruelty turn cruel.

Both these novels end in defeat; both confirm what Lucille, in Janice Shinebourne’s The Last English Plantation tells her daughter of ‘coolie’ life and marriage: ‘they drink rum ... and beat their wives, and fight .... Their wives cook from three o’clock in the morning to late at night! You want to be a coolie woman? .... Coolie women have to carry all the burdens for the men, the burden of the sick, the old, the children ... and get no thanks for it, only [beatings]’ (128). But with the passage of time, things have changed and improved. The descendants of those ‘coolies’ who went to Mauritius have fared the best, while the situation of the so-called ‘Indian’ Tamils in Sri Lanka remains the most unfortunate. The authors mentioned in this article are themselves evidence that at least some escaped ‘cooliehood’. Through intelligence and resolve, they got into various lifeboats and escaped the long-lingering effects of ‘cooliehood’ — helped by those for whom escape was too late in life, and too early in history.

Coolie is ‘the name of our hard-working, economy-building forefathers .... All this they gave to us and more. In return ... what greater tribute can we pay to them than to keep alive the name by which they were called. COOLIE is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements’. (Singh 353)
NOTES

1 My thanks to the British Library, to R. Dunstan of the School of Oriental & African Studies, and to the following who kindly sent me material: Satendra Nandan (Australia), Noela Shanmugan (California), Shanthi Somasundrum (London). Above all, and as always, my thanks to Liebetraut Sarvan.

2 See, Charles Sarvan 1996b.

3 ‘In 1964, a few years before independence, racial clashes took place on an unprecedented scale ... [For example] at Wismar ... hundreds of East Indian residents were attacked and killed. The men and children were locked up in their houses which were then set afire. The women and young girls were raped, mutilated and then dumped in the river to die’ (Dabydeen 1986, 46).

4 See also his Dreams & Reflections (1969).

5 See also, Charles Sarvan, 1989.

6 It is alleged that the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils has been no different: ‘Ever since independence successive Sri Lankan governments have done everything ... to render the Tamils a separate people, and inferior — and then cried out against that separation when the Tamils embraced it’ (Sivanandan 1984, i).

7 See also, Hugh Tinker, 222.

8 For a wider perspective, readers may wish to turn, for example, to Doris Lessing’s story, ““Leopard” George’: ‘Who will want to marry her? ... These girls, what happens to them? ... No decent man will have her’ (161–62).

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Raghupathi Bhatta, whose work features on the cover of this issue, is an artist of Mysore, Southern India. His art draws upon themes and images of the *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Dhammapadha*. Bhatta's miniature paintings and *Ganjifa* (traditional playing cards introduced to India in the early sixteenth century) have been exhibited overseas in England, USA, Tunisia, Germany and Japan. Of the four paintings that follow, the first is of Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune and wife of Vishnu. Accounts of her birth say that she rose from the churning of the milky ocean, seated on a lotus and holding a lotus blossom in her hand. The second painting features Indrani, one of seven divine mothers known as *Sapthamatrika*. Each is a *shakti*, or female counterpart of a Hindu god, and each mother is identifiable by her weapons, ornaments, mounts and banner emblems. The next two paintings are drawn from the *Dhammapada* (perhaps the most well-known and often-quoted of Buddhist sacred texts). The last painting of the two features Buddha triumphing over the twin evils of *krodha* (anger) and *kama* (lust) – represented by the two serpents.
Raghupathi Bhatta of Mysore, one of India’s most promising traditional artists, hails from a family of South-Indian Pandits (Brahmin priests). It was in the ancient town of Nagamangala, seventy kilometers from Mysore, that his artistic imagination was fired. First, by the exquisite details of Hoysala craftsmanship in the temples there, and then, by the beautiful nineteenth-century playing cards of the Mysore Maharaja, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV. He began his artistic career by learning Ganjifa, the delicate art on these tiny playing cards. But there were no gurus in the family from whom he could learn this centuries-old craft which had fascinated him since he was a child. To quote Bhatta: ‘In the early seventies, I bought a few Ganjifa paintings from the Mysore Palace. Since then, it’s grown into an obsession and I’ve lived for, and by Ganjifa, collecting as much information as I could, including old photographs and cards from all over India and Nepal’.

To capture the real meaning of this delicate art, Bhatta spent time researching materials at Melkote and Srirangapatna. At Nagamangala, he was able to trace the family of a traditional painter from whose work he painstakingly taught himself, imbibing the technique of centuries through a slow process of discovery. And when he finally settled down to re-creating the intricate work of the nineteenth-century card-makers in his modest studio, Raghupathi was glad he’d had a chance to learn the traditional Mysore style from an established Master — M.S. Nanjunda Rao, at the Chitrakala Parishat in Bangalore.

Raghupathi Bhatta brings a fresh and original approach to the traditional art of Ganjifa. His cards, or chadas as they are called in Karnataka, are very distinctive. Oval-shaped, and with a diameter of about seven centimetres, the tiny discs are cut to the required size from strips of cotton cloth pasted onto several layers of paper glued together. The cloth is given a priming of rice gruel (ganji) followed by a coating of white clay to toughen it and extend the life of the painting. The background is then filled in, using vegetable pigments bound with glue. And finally, the principle figures are drawn in with deft strokes, using fine brushes made from squirrels’ tails.

Bhatta’s pioneering efforts to infuse new life into Ganjifa won him the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya Vishwakarma award in 1992. In the same year, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan sponsored a one-man show of his paintings in London. In 1995, he won the National Master Craftsman Award (conferred by the President of India). In 1994, he was back in England’s capital at the Victoria and Albert
Museum, courtesy of Art in Action, Oxford, demonstrating his intricate work to a wonder-struck audience. Subsequently, he has held overseas exhibitions in the USA and Tunisia (1997), Germany (1998) and Japan (December 2000).

Raghupathi’s miniature paintings show the same attention to detail, complex iconography and sense of wonder that characterise his *ganjifa* paintings. These superb paintings done in splendid colours on wafer-thin slivers of sandalwood and tiny paper discs are inspired by Bhatta’s profound knowledge of the *Shastra*s or Hindu religious and philosophical texts, his own devout lifestyle and the history of Karnataka. The tender language of line and colour through which they communicate, is inspired by the browns and greens of the forests around Bhatta’s native place at the foothills of the Western Ghats, by Bhatta’s own experience of the secret life of the jungle, the rustle of leaves, the murmur of a mountain stream, the music of birds and insects.

Bhatta draws on epic themes that have Stirred the imagination of both ordinary people and artists for centuries now — the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The *piece de resistance* of his oeuvre is the set of *Ganjifa Ramayana* cards he was commissioned to create for the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1992. A series of sixty paintings depicting the life of Ram in narrative sequence, the cards have a fresco-like composition.

In his new works, Raghupathi has been inspired by the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Dhammapadha* and by classical ayurvedic philosophy. These splendid miniatures are done in vibrant vegetable colours and finished with a natural varnish. Paintings with an embossed effect incorporate sandal-wood paste, and some are done with gold leaf. The figure seem to melt away into the background and at the same time to be quite tangible, with gesso work accentuating their outlines in some places.

Should you drop by on a week day at Raghupathi’s cottage in Mysore, you will find him seated cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by enthusiastic students whom he is training in accordance with the *guru-shishya parampara* (the ancient teacher-student tradition). Raghupthi realises that today’s traditional artists cannot be complacent, saddled as they are with the awesome responsibility of saving their art from extinction. ‘We cannot afford to be mere imitators of our forefathers. If traditional art is to regain its lost glory, we must innovate,’ he says. So, while he works within a framework that is still clearly traditional in nature, Bhatta, in his own way, continues to stretch the boundaries. As he continues to experiment and explore the well-springs of his own creativity in a way that is both unique and powerful, he re-affirms his traditional moorings.

It is a treat to watch him at work. With firm, rapid strokes, he outlines a figure over the ground colours. His line has all the rhythm and grace of the *chitrakars* (artists) of a century ago. A few strokes of the brush and a vision of another world, powerful and intensely spiritual, comes to life on the tiny disc. An entire heritage of thought, feeling and creativity crystallised in a few square centimetres of paper and cloth.
GANJIFA – ‘THE GAME OF THE GODS’

Ganjifa, inspired by gods, demons, sages, courtly life, fauna and flora, is a unique art form struggling to survive in contemporary India, where there are few takers for traditional art. Derived from the Persian word ganj meaning ‘treasure’, ganjifa signifies playing cards in India, Nepal, Iran and some Arab countries. These traditional playing cards have a fascinating history that goes back several centuries.

The game was a favourite pastime of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, and his daughter Begum Gul Badan. According to the Babarnama, a chronicle of Babar’s times, the Emperor introduced the game to India in the summer of 1527 when he sent ganjifa cards as a gift to his friend Sindh. By the end of the sixteenth century, several different types of games had developed. In the Ain-I-Akbari, Akbar’s biographer, Abul Fazal, provides a carefully tabulated description of a new game Akbar had invented. This game of ninety-six cards with eight suits consisting of twelve cards each, remains the norm today, though no set has survived.

The first four suits of this eight-suited Ganjifa are the strong ones and are called Bishbar. These are the Taj or crown signifying the imperial court; Safed or white, representing silver coin; Shamsha or sabre, standing for the palace guard; and Ghulam, symbolising the emperor’s retinue. The last four are the Kambar or weak suits. These are Chang, a small stringed instrument representing the king’s entertainment; Surkh or Suraj (sun) also called Kanchan (gold) stood for a gold coin; Barat symbolised the imperial chancellery; while Qimash (Persian for goods and merchandise) represented the emperor’s stores.

The game spread to all comers of the Mughal Empire and came to be known as Changakanch in the west and Changarani in the south. In the east in Orissa even today, along the byways leading to the Jagannath temple at Puri, players while away the hours with a game of Navagunjara, the local name for the royal Ganjifa. Where Hindu deities have replaced the figures on the court cards, though the suit signs of the Mughal Ganjifa have been retained, the game is also known as Ath-rangi.

The Hinduisation of Ganjifa themes spawned a variety of new cards and games that spread among the ruling classes and commoners alike. The genesis of the Dashavatara Ganjifa that flourished in Nepal, Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka was one of them. Similar in structure and rules of play to the Mughal Ganjifa, the Dashavatara pack has ten suits — Matsya, Karma, Varaha, Narasimha, Yamana, Parashurama, Ramachandra, Balarama, Krishna and Kalki — each representing an avator of the Hindu god Vishnu.

Traditional Ganjifas include interesting variations such as the nine-suited, 108 card Navagraha Ganjifa with the nine planets presiding over each of the nine suits; the eight-suited Ramayana set; the eight-suited Ashtadikpala Ganjifa (the
eight guardians of the regions of the world): the *Rashi Ganjifas* featuring the Zodiac in twelve suits; the 144 card *Ramayana Ganjappa* of Sonepur in Orissa, where Rama and his allies hold sway over the first six suits and Ravana and his followers dominate the last six. There is also the hexagon-shaped, eight-suited ivory *Arundhati Ganjifa* and the *Sapta Rishis* (seven sages) set. With the Hindu pantheon so well-represented, *Ganjifa* also came to be known as *Devara Aata* or the Game of the Gods.

Among the most beautiful and intricate *ganjifa* cards are those known as *Chadas* that originated in Mysore in the early nineteenth century, during the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III. A great aficionado of the game, the Raja commissioned several artists to paint these *Chadas*. He also compiled an encyclopaedia in Kannada called *Shritathwanidhi* that describes thirteen different *Chada* games, some of which required packs of as many as 320 or 360 cards. One of these, named *Krishnaraja* after its royal inventor, is typically Mysorean in pictorial composition and has four suits, each consisting of eighteen cards commanded by Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and Indra. The symbols on the suit of cards are specifically related to the Wodeyar dynasty — the *Ganda Bherund* or double-headed eagle (emblem of the dynasty), the *Jatayus* or vulture, the *Makara* or crocodile, the *Hathi* or elephant and the *Gaja virala* or lion, to name a few.

Since every card is a little masterpiece, hand-made and hand-painted, and every pack an original creation, it is difficult to speak of a standard pattern for *Ganjifa*. Traditional *ganjifa* cards are circular in shape with diameters ranging from 22 mm and 32 mm to 120 mm in the larger cards. The more ornate cards, called the *Durbar Kalams*, meant for the nobility, were crafted in exquisite detail on expensive materials such as ivory, tortoise shell, mother of pearl and enamelled precious metals. The less expensive *Bazaar kalams* were made from papier-mache, palm leaf, waste paper and cloth. Today *Ganjifas* are made from layers of paper and cloth glued together, starched and burnished.

*Ganjifa* has its own set of conventions. The game must be played with a used pack of cards arranged face down in the centre of a clean white rectangular piece of cloth. Usually only three players are required, but for multi-suited games, four or five players are admitted. Play moves in an anti-clockwise direction, the object being to make as many tricks as possible. There are no trumps and the player with the maximum number of cards, regardless of their value, is declared the winner.

On just a few centimetres of material, these cards provide a window into the past by means of their delicate, sensitive art. Mughal and *Dashavatara Ganjifa* are still played in some parts of India — under street lamps in Hyderabad, Bombay and in the environs of the Jagannath temple in Puri. But the craft itself is threatened with extinction despite valiant efforts by artists like Surajit Dutta of Bishnupur, Banamala Mahapatra of Puri, Raghupathi Bhatta of Mysore and connoisseurs like Kishore N. Ghorandas of Bombay to preserve these precious heirlooms and keep the tradition alive.
‘Children, children, call your father.’ That was mother calling from theulumththam. There was a tone of urgency, as though the end of the world was at hand; and in mother’s case she believed that since father was the head of the house, only he could save it. In spite of the repeated calls we dared not disturb father. With all the excitement that was being generated, nothing could spoil the tranquility that a good cigar gave him. He sat on the front thinnai puffing away at a cigar he had rolled himself. He wouldn’t even deem to inquire what the excitement was all about because he blamed all this on the hysteria of the womenfolk. He treasured moments like this, moments in which he could indulge in the pleasant ritual of cigar smoking. His pleasure was heightened by the fact that he never purchased his cigars from the village shops but got the tobacco leaves from a friend who cultivated and cured them to his exacting tastes. These long black leaves were wrapped in banana fronds in order to keep them damp; he would tear out the tobacco leaf necessary for a smoke.

Meanwhile the excitement in the rest of the household continued. Children stood stupefied while the women scurried to and fro, chattering inconsequentially, but doing nothing constructive. The neighbours too came to see the meditating figure of our Aunt. In our village there was an Aunt in every family. She was part of the family set up, generally unmarried and an important appendage to the family system. She was loved and sometimes feared, a constant baby sitter who could be secretly cruel to her wards. Our Aunt was of course different from all these other aunts that lived in our village, in that she was given to religious pursuits and to deep meditation.

We called her Aunt Yogi, a name we thought was apt since we all thought she was on the road to yogihood, but in fact was short for Yogeswary. Now Aunt Yogi sat, eyes closed and cross-legged, on a thetpai grass prayer mat, deep in meditation; her body was taut and she seemed to have stopped breathing. Her arms and forehead were daubed with holy ash. We were used to her periods of meditation, but today it was unusually long and she had not come out of it. This alarmed mother. Father on the other hand was unmoved. He sat apart and at times of crisis such as this he was cynical, to the annoyance of the family.

‘Let’s hope the white ants will not build their nests over her,’ he laughed when mother approached him for some relief. He ridiculed those myths about Yogis of
ancient times who meditated for months and years so that they were ultimately entombed by the rising mounds of anthills around them.

Unlike aunts in other families who were non-personalities, our Aunt Yogi wielded some power in our household, especially after this long bout of meditation. She was aware that she had won the admiration of the family and the neighbours. She declared Mondays and Fridays as days of fasting and meditation. We couldn’t fathom her reasoning. While the handful of Christians in our village had only Sunday as a day of prayer, we wondered what divine inspiration made her declare two days in the week as holy days. The whole house had to be washed, the pots and pans scrubbed, saffron water sprinkled and incense burned. It was an upsetting experience for the whole family, though it was done in the name of some gods. The end result of all this was that we were irritable with one another, while Aunt Yogi calmly got on to her grass mat and went into her private world of meditation.

To add to our misery the cooking of fish and mutton was banned, and the pots used for this purpose were relegated to the back yard, where they reposed on a makeshift rack, drying in the sun.

Long before the cock crowed and long before the women of our village had drawn milk from the cows, she was up. She pottered around in the dark, knocking over something or other, splashing water washing herself, and finally waking the whole household with her singing of devotional songs in a high nasal voice. Father would have been glad to get rid of her, give her in marriage, and he was very much afraid that she was getting on in years. But to his dismay she tolerated no talk of marriage. Many a proposal was rejected by her. Father’s desperation knew no bounds. He offered all he could give as a dowry: money, a small piece of land on which he promised he would build a house, and the traditional set of jewellery every bride was supposed to possess. As a last minute idea, he even threw in a small piece of paddy field. Wasn’t she his responsibility? He thought it imperative he should do something positive.

‘She says her heart is with God; there is no room for anyone else,’ mother said helplessly. Father only sighed a deep sigh of desperation.

Life in our home now began to change radically. This was because of an Almanac which had fallen into the hands of our Aunt Yogi. She read many a fast or feast, an auspicious or an inauspicious day, into this book. There was not a day in the calendar which was not significant to her religious obligations. On some days she would announce ‘Attami-Navami, between 7:14 and 8:34, very bad time to go on a journey or do anything,’ a warning we could hardly ignore. On other occasions it would be a dramatic foreboding. ‘Today is Amavasai, the Black moon, the period of the dark serpents.’ Such statements were ominous and we would not dare step out into the garden. By and by she eroded father’s position as the head of our house. How could he make any decision when his very being was being subverted? The fear of failure and doom seemed to hover over his head. Finally, he too capitulated to her insidious onslaught, at least that is how it seemed to us.
He began to consult our Aunt about auspicious and inauspicious days; in other words he seemed to have given over his whole life to her Almanac. The womenfolk were of course pleased to see his maleness humbled. But what they did not know was that father had a tenacious disposition; though he appeared to have succumbed to Aunt Yogi’s authority, underneath all this façade his mind was made up never to give up his attempts to settle her in marriage, which he considered his primary concern.

From the time father thought the time was ripe to get Aunt Yogi married, there was a constant floe of visitors to our house; people who came to look for a bride. Aunt Yogi was none the wiser as to who these people were, as father orchestrated the whole act in such a way that it would seem just a casual social evening. Those who came invariably looked forward to being served with sweetmeats, a tray of betel and hot cups of tea. They also expected to be presented, for their vicarious pleasure, with the spectacle of a maid dressed in her finery and bedecked with the family jewels, while they sat around making small talk, simultaneously scrutinising her with their microscopic eyes, as though she were a specimen for their analysis. This was not to be so in our home. In spite of the tea and the delicacies they had been served, they made an embarrassed excuse and left without much ceremony when they saw her. She presented an outrageous sight. Wrapped not in the finery of a would-be bride but in a plain washed saree, forehead and arms bearing the distinct marks of holy ash, she stood there smelling of incense and camphor; it emanated from her very pores. Even her hair was not oiled and combed as tidily as it should have been, but was tied in a most casual manner with a deft twist of hand.

During the evening when dusk had fallen, mother would relate stories from the puranas. We would sit round her and listen as gods fought the evil forces; they had constant battles with the Asuras who, demon-like, took different forms every time they were vanquished. How frightened we were of these dark nights, of the rustle of the palmyrah leaves or the distant hoot of the night bird. The other times we would sing devotional songs. These were happy moments. Aunt Yogi too was happy. She would pull out the old family serapina and accompany us with its wheezing notes. These were moments of Bhakthi. Mother told us ‘the Devas are listening’ and we sang to their presence. The sound of a voice or the flash of a light among the dark palmyrah palms were the portents we looked for. We believed that ‘the gods are near us at that moment’, but we were never comfortable about the idea of the unknown. Each one of us had our doubts and fears. Did God look like those stone statues we had in our temple? Or was he more frightening. Aunt Yogi was of course prepared to receive any of the gods. Mother, on the other hand, was very practical. She always cooked extra rice, so that there was some food left over in our pots after a meal. Mother said this was for the mysterious visitor. She said it could be Shiva himself or any other god who would appear in
the form of a beggar or mendicant. Gods wanted to test us for our charity and kindness, and they would reward us accordingly.

Aunt Yogi was not going to take a chance; she too waited for the arrival of the mysterious visitor.

To our annoyance it was only a common mendicant who would appear in the hot afternoon. Robed in saffron, daubed in holy ash, his matted hair tied in a knot and carrying the paraphernalia of his vocation he would call, ‘Amma, oh mother of the house, feed a poor sadhu’. Standing in the front courtyard of the house, fanning himself with a palmyrah leaf fan, he would go on in undertones chanting the name of God; ‘Shiva, Shiva, Shiva …’, the magic words falling softly like a soothing balm that would alleviate his misery. Aunt Yogi quickly prepared a place on the front thinnai for the sadhu to have his meal. He washed his betel-stained mouth, gargling and spitting out, with the water she offered him in a brass chembu. He sat cross-legged while she served him the rice and curries onto the plantain leaf she placed before him. She topped it all with ghee she had collected herself while churning curd every day. The sadhu first sang a few devotional songs, and then set out a handful of food on a piece of banana leaf which he left in the garden for the crows, the symbolic vehicle on which Saturn travelled. The birds would swoop down like a black cloud falling, cawing and fighting. It was after this that he would get back to his food. He fell over it hungrily. In no time the plantain leaf was clean of even a single grain of rice. Aunt Yogi followed him with her eyes and waited with bated breath for the ‘miracle’ to happen — the sudden revelation, the sudden transformation from lowly mendicant to the glorious Shiva. It never happened. But she never gave up. She continued to feed the holy men that passed through our village. They ate the food she offered, blessed her and the house and went their way.

Aunt Yogi frequented almost every temple. She knew about the poojas and the festivals that were being celebrated in each of them. At the great temple of Nallur we would follow the Bhajanai singers who moved behind the Thér, the resplendent chariot in which the God was being taken. The Thér was elaborately carved out of wood and stood a hundred feet in height. Drawn by the devotees who pulled and tugged at the long thick coir ropes, it moved slowly and heavily on its enormous solid wooden wheels. It was at one of these festivals that we encountered Ramalingam, who was also from our village of Navaly. He was leading a chorus of Bhajanai singers. A stout figure whose chest, shoulders and arms were covered with a profuse growth of hair that seemed to be recompense enough for the complete lack of it on his glistening pate, he stood in the centre of a group of singers. As they sang the Bakthi songs, he swayed from side to side in a trance. Nothing touched him, nor was he totally aware of his surroundings; the nadeswaram and the thavil, the clanging cymbal, the singing and dancing, and human beings crying out their praises to God.
Then there were others, bodies bare, rolling prostrate behind the Thér, expiating all their sins, and still others whirling past in groups, sharp minute golden spears glistening on the arms, chest and back, where they had been pierced into the flesh. Some had their cheeks pierced through, and carried on their shoulders a kavadi, a wooden frame decorated with peacock feathers. While they danced a few were held and guided by ropes that had been connected to metal hooks stuck deep into their bare backs. They didn’t feel the hurt as the hooks pulled at their flesh, nor did a drop of blood flow.

Mother insisted that we accompany Aunt Yogi on her pilgrimages. Thus we went from temple to temple. Sellachchanathi, Maviddapuram, Nallur, Kataragama and Munneswaram. We visited them all. No temple seemed too distant to a mind like that of our Aunt. She had few possessions, so it was easy for her to take off.

‘Don’t worry, Akka,’ she would say, ‘God will provide annadhanam wherever his disciples go’. There were madams, places where pilgrims could rest. During the festival season there was plenty of food being cooked and served to the pilgrims by benefactors, in memory of their relatives who had departed this world. The food was cooked in enormous cauldrons and served on plantain leaves to the hundreds of pilgrims at the madams. Wherever we went Ramalingam and his group of singers would be there. There were other groups too at these festivals. They all whirled past us, singing, dancing, in a world of their own.

It was at one of these festivals that our Aunt began to act in a peculiar manner. She insisted that we follow Ramalingam’s Bhajanai group as they went round the temple. She stood close to the group with the forlorn look. She even clapped her hands in unison with the group. We even saw her head sway a little. Would she start dancing, with hair falling loose like all those in the group? It was not uncommon for women to go into a trance and dance at these festivals. The sound of innumerable bells ringing, and the voices of thousands calling the names of the gods to the accompaniment of the pulsating throb of the drums, touched the very fibres of those devotees so that they could hardly restrain themselves from swaying and dancing. Here was Ramalingam again, leading the chorus, his body gyrating to the rhythm of the songs and drums. He wore a white veshti tied round his waist while the upper part of his body was bare except for a chain of large rudracham seeds hanging round his neck.

The triple stripes of holy ash stood out stark and white against his dark glistening forehead. He was not Ramalingam, the man from Navaly, he was here a part of the mass movement of whirling bodies, clashing cymbals, clapping hands, sweeping past in the sweating hot afternoon, moving with the mass rhythm, his individual micro-centric movement becoming a part of the merging into the wider, larger universal pulsating, the tala, the rhythm of life itself.

Our Aunt Yogi could not sleep that night in the madam. She was too full of the day’s events. She spoke of nothing else but Ramalingam and his Bhajanai group. We were too sleepy to stay awake. Before long the madam was silent, except for
the snores of some of its inmates. Aunt Yogi continued her musings notwithstanding. Even after we went home, Aunt Yogi continued in the same strain. Mother was impressed with Aunt’s praises of Shiva and all the gods, and especially by the fact that she had at last found a guru to lead her on the path to yogihood. Father, on the other hand, was alarmed, though he was also happy. While he was hoping to find a suitable partner for Aunt Yogi, he never dreamed that she would be enamoured of a Bhajanai singer. Mother insisted that Ramalingam was no charlatan. She had seen him at various festivals, and he not only impressed her, but the fact that he came from a good family reaffirmed her confidence that only he would be a suitable guru for our Aunt. One could never fathom what was in mother’s mind when she decided that our Aunt must surely follow Ramalingam. Father had other ideas, and he held steadfast to them.

‘Yogi, are you sure about Ramalingam,’ mother was heard asking, to which Aunt Yogi replied with a deep sigh, ‘Aiyo, Akka, there is no room for anyone else in my heart, he is my guru, and he and none other will lead me … and Akka, I am prepared to follow him’.

Father, sitting on the front thinnai, was rolling one of his favourite cigars; he was listening to the conversation that was taking place inside the house somewhere. A smile touched his face. ‘Once it was Murugan, the six-faced god she had given her heart to,’ he told himself, still rolling the cigar meticulously; he even dared to laugh softly as the women were in the ulmuththam and out of earshot, ‘now it is this fellow Ramalingam … a bit crazy with his Bhakthi, but quite a steady fellow, with property too … he will make a good match for our Yogi I am sure’.

Having rolled the cigar he tied the ends with a piece of thread and, chewing the loose pieces that protruded, he spat into the white sandy garden. Smelling it through its length he shook his head with satisfaction: ‘the best from Inuvil,’ he said, and struck a match. Mother’s voice could be heard in conversation with Aunt Yogi while they rolled the mats on which paddy had been drying in the sun. Father had taken a few puffs, he was at peace. The bell at the Ganesh temple was now ringing, summoning the people to the evening pooja. Father put away his cigar and reached for the brass chembu of water with which he washed his mouth. It was time for a pooja and a thanksgiving to Ganesh.
Blanche Baughan with her dog Gale at Akaroa, 1935
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/4)
On April 13th, 1905, at eight o’clock in the morning, a young English woman, Blanche Edith Baughan, was standing among the pine trees of Long Look-out, a hill on Banks Peninsula, New Zealand. She was looking up at the sky, when suddenly ‘the heavens opened’. As she recalled later,

I was swept up and out of myself altogether into a flood of White Glory. I had no sense of time or place. The ecstasy was terrifying while it lasted. It could have lasted only a minute or two. It went as suddenly as it came. I found myself bathed with tears, but they were tears of joy. I felt one with everything and everybody, and somehow I knew that what I had experienced was Reality and that Reality is perfection. (Hall 104)1

Writing sometime later, she adds, ‘no words seem to me able to convey a thousandth part of the depth and reality of that experience, even so far as my own taste of it has gone. I fancy all one’s normal faculties are first fused and then transcended’ (Hall 104).

In her 1998 work, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*, Gauri Viswanathan discusses the experience of religious conversion, and asks ‘whether individual change ever occurs independently of drifts and currents in intellectual and political life, and whether the sorts of commitments made by individuals to new belief systems can at all be separated from their responsiveness to new and ever changing historical conditions’ (184). In this paper I intend to suggest a number of frames by which Baughan’s individual mystical experience may be contextualised in terms of ‘changing historical conditions’, in an attempt to answer the question Viswanathan poses, ‘How does a focus on conversion facilitate the writing of a life story into history rather than as history’ (184).

The first interpretive frame I intend to suggest is that of family, psychiatry and madness. Baughan’s maternal grandfather had been an inmate of Broadmoor, the English asylum for the criminally insane, for most of his life, and when Baughan was ten years old her mother killed her father in a fit of homicidal mania. She was judged insane, and Baughan and her sisters looked after her until her death in 1900. The fearful fascination of the Victorian age with madness was a private and unexpressed part of Baughan’s adulthood. Her ‘progressive’ interest in birth control, eugenics, and the responsibilities of heredity were surely connected to this personal history, as was her refusal to marry. Was the ecstasy on Long Look-out the sinister emergence of her family history of instability? Did she see it as such? Was her
Revisiting Long Look Out, 1935
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/5)
interpretive insistence of the benevolent nature of its message a way of warding off a deterministic family teleology?

An alternative interpretive frame for Baughan’s experience at Long Look-out is that of the nineteenth-century crisis of faith and religious doubt. In this context, we might see it as a dramatically envisioned alternative to the narrow and stale restrictions of Baughan’s childhood Anglicanism. There is a balance here between the personal and the historical moment. As Viswanathan says, ‘Individual conversions are an index of cultural change without themselves being subject to a crude form of determinism’ (185). Modernity, science (in particular Darwinian theory), biblical scholarship and new relativist readings of mythological and sacred texts moved many in the nineteenth century away from conventional forms of belief. In her 1898 volume, Verses, published before she left England, Baughan expresses a widely felt dissatisfaction with existing religious forms:

The people bent above their books,
And sweetly pray’d the priest,
My heart stay’d frozen by their fire,
And fasted at their feast.

But where the lonely breezes blow
Above the lonely sod,
Where mountain heads are hid in mist,
My heart was hid in God. (‘Church’ 24)

It is not belief here that is problematic. Rather it is form and access. The escape, which the second stanza of the poem identifies with the natural rather than the acculturated world, the conflation of that landscape with mystical union — ‘My heart was hid in God’ — suggests a further possible interpretative frame for Long Look-out, that of Victorian refractions of Romanticism and the Wordsworthian sublime.

Between the publication of Verses in 1898 and her collection Shingleshord and Other Verses in 1908, Baughan’s mother died and she emigrated to New Zealand. She took with her the language of sublimity — lonely breezes, mountain heads hid in mist — but this was no longer appropriate to her objective surroundings. The landscape with which she was now constrained was disconcertingly strange, new and in the process of being re-formed. Romanticism can deal with the desolate urban landscape; it can deal with awe and terror in the natural landscape; but it has no language to deal with the clearance and refiguring of the physical that the modern colonial project entails. In her short story ‘An Early Morning Walk (North Island)’, Baughan describes the new landscape:

Beyond this cottage, Millicent found herself between wide, bare paddocks, simply divided off from the road by fences of barbed wire. Just as far as ever she could see, the land between her and the mountain distance still beckoning ahead was all one huge ocean of naked grass country, running away into lumpy ridges, traversed by sharp line gullies and everywhere alas! strewn with the unsightly remains of burnt Bush. Here and there, it is true, a clump of native trees might yet be seen; but even these were doomed, for Bush trees are gregarious, and will not long continue to survive without the shelter
of their fellows; and for inches of such verdure there were acres and acres of the barren devastation. The great half-burnt skeletons of the forest, grey and black and bleached and piebald, stood gauntly up, as though in mute protest from tawny hillside and green flat. They were splintered and shattered; at their feet lay multitudes of their brethren—in enormous rotting logs, and their mouldering black stumps, from which they had been severed; and it was only a question of time before they too would rest their ruins on the ground. (119)

Baughan’s poetic version of this scene, ‘A Bush Section’, tries to replicate in its language the fragmentation of the landscape:

Logs, at the door, by the fence; logs, broadcast over the paddock;
Sprawling in motionless thousands away down the green of the gully,
Logs, grey and black. And the opposite rampart of ridges
Bristles against the sky, all the tawny, tumultuous landscape
Is stuck, and pricked, and spiked with the standing black and grey splinters,
Strewn over its hollows and hills, with the long, prone, grey-black logs. (79)

Gone is the formal regularity of verse and metre of her early works, the conventional markers of textualised landscape, the confident resolution.

Colonial writers of the Maoriland period (1880–1920) have a consciousness of the artificiality of the cultural landscape, the willed and arbitrary nature of its exported linguistic markers. Baughan’s work from this period is innovative in that it attempts new ways of writing, which take into account the newness of place. The language of Romantic sublimity had its place in colonial discourse, but was most comfortably situated in the reworking of indigenous mythological material from Maori sources, as Baughan does in poems such as ‘Maui’s Fish’, where the land is configured not as raw and new but as archaic, by virtue of the appropriation of Maori material:

Tongariro! O Taranki,
Your splendour! Your shooting of spear-points, keen, sea-wet, to the sun!
Ruapehu, Kaikoura, Aorangi, Tar-rua, long armed Ruahine! —
Midsummer clouds curling luminous up from the sky-line:
Far-fallen islands of light, summon’d back to the sun:
Soaring Kawahai-birds —
How ye soar’d, shining pinions! Straight into the heaven high above you:
How ye shot up, bright Surprises! seizing, possessing the sky:
How firm, great white Clouds, ye took seat! (53)

In Maoriland, the landscape is both peopled and empty—peopled by the ghosts of Maori, emptied of their actual presence as they are figured in terms of the ‘dying race’ topos. ‘There isn’t a Maori left in the Bay now, as you know’ says the old woman in Baughan’s short story, ‘Grandmother Speaks’, ‘— not a full blooded one. Some they went to the North Island; most is dead ... well, well ...!’ (23). The land is thus simultaneously mythicised, and made available for settlement and colonisation. A form of imperial Orientalism, the Maoriland use of Maori mythological texts was part of nineteenth-century comparative mythological and anthropological scholarship. This in turn fed the search for alternative sources of spirituality uncontaminated by European scepticism and modernity. India, the ‘mystic east’, was a central part of this imperial network.
Hunter's House at Chorlton
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/3)
It is clear from her papers that the interpretive frame that Baughan herself used to give Long Look-out coherence was that of India and Vedanta. I have been unable to find at what stage Baughan made formal contact with the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement through its American mission, but by 1916 she was corresponding with Swami Pragnananda at the Avaita Ashrama at Mayaviti, and with an unnamed Swami from the Webster Street Temple in San Francisco. Her poems were being published in the Indian journal Prabuddha Bharata. She visited California, and may have visited India. When she moved to Akaroa, she named her new house ‘The Ashrama’.

The Vedanta movement was at this stage relatively new. Having its origins in India at the time of the Bengali Renaissance in the 1860s, Vedanta had first appeared in the United States with the attendance of Ramakrishna’s follower, Vivekananda, at the World Parliament of Religions, part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. This occasion was the first time authentic Asian teachers had direct contact with Western audiences (Jackson 26). While Ramakrishna himself was a traditionalist and mystic, with affiliations to Kali, Vaishnavism and Tantrism, as well as Vedanta, Vivekananda was far more attuned and acceptable to the Western and especially the American religious scene. He was born in Calcutta in 1863 to a middle-class professional family, and educated at the Presidency College and the Scottish Church College. There he read Herbert Spenser, John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte. His first awareness of Ramakrishna came from his English teacher William Hastie in a lecture on Wordsworth’s nature mysticism, a somewhat paradoxical source, but one that suggests the complexity of imperial intellectual dynamics.
As with Baughan's contemporary Annie Besant and the Theosophy movement, the syncretism of Vedanta was one of its strongest attractions. In her commonplace book, Baughan records those Vedanta teachings which she found most useful alongside passages from Emerson, Plato, Annie Besant, St John of the Cross, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Thompson, Plotinus, Tagore, Voltaire, Julian of Norwich, and Swedenborg, as well as a transcription of Dr Arnold's prayer (MSX-2383, Turnbull Library, Wellington). The monism of Vedanta was a counter to the theological problem of suffering and evil, a major issue for doubtful Victorian Christians such as Baughan. Vedanta accepted Darwinian science and saw it as consistent with Vedantist teaching. Baughan's reforming social activism was likewise validated by the specifically reforming, activist slant of Vedanta. And in a sphere that included the bad and the duplicitous as well as the holy, Vedanta's intellectual integrity appealed. As one critic puts it, 'their favoured religious mode was the lecture, and their preferred form of ritual was serious conversation' (Jackson ix). Vivekananda himself was scornful of the more bizarre practices of American spiritualism, wondering whether Hindus were really in need of 'dead ghosts of Russians or Americans'. He recalled a domestic disturbance between two spiritualist mediums at a boarding house where he was staying in New York, when the wife of one of them appealed to Vivekananda, 'Is it fair of him to treat me like this, when I make all the ghosts?' (Walker 169). 'I am perfectly aware' he wrote in a letter in 1895 'that although some truth underlies the mass of mystical thought which has burst on the world of late, it is for the most part full of motives unworthy, or insane' (8: 335).

Perhaps, too, the un-colonial nature of Vedanta appealed to the nascent colonial nationalism of the Maoriland period. Unlike Theosophy, which was part of the texture of the imperial Indian scene, and in some respects compromised by it, Vedanta's Western links were through America, and integrated with and tolerant of American intellectual spiritual traditions such as Swedenborgian Transcendentalism and Unitarianism. In Baughan's case, Vedanta coalesced with her support for imperial federation, Home Rule, and dominion status in diverse parts of the empire, and resulted in a less locally delineated internationalism, what some contemporary critics call 'intercoloniality' rather than the more overt nationalism of many of her Maoriland contemporaries. Newton's judgement that 'Baughan's rapturous transcendentalism negotiates and accommodates the colonialist imperative' (94) is only partially true. To be transcendent is to be universalising. Nationalism is a concept about which she expresses anxiety. The idea of India is of crucial importance here. A letter to Baughan from Śwami Prajnananda in 1916 reassures her that nationalism is only in opposition to 'noble universalism in thought and culture' when it is political and egotistical. 'But when nationalism is spiritual,' he asserts, 'the collective pursuit of man's higher altruistic duties becomes the foundation of nationality'. India is the place where that spiritual nationalism is most possible, thus 'it is in the interests of all mankind to work for Indian nationalism' (Letter of Nov. 16th, 1916. MS-Papers-0198).

Gauri Viswanathan suggests that in the case of the Theosophical Movement, Besant's advocacy for universal brotherhood with its underlying belief in continuing evolutionary progress, has implicit within it the notion of racial hierarchy, and amounts to a re-inscription of empire (186). In Baughan's case, the Vedantic universalism of her later poetry blurs the particularity of place which the Maoriland writers of the late colonial period made a central part of their nationalist project. In her final collection, Poems from the Port Hills (1923), Vedanta and its universalising transcendence is overt. The 'tawny, tumultuous landscape ... stuck, and prickled,
and spiked' (‘A Bush Section’ 79) of her earlier verse has been subsumed into a discourse of lyricism and abstraction. In the poem ‘The Summit Track’, she writes:

Far now below lie all humanity’s
Close claims; and that which more than human is
In us awakes! And deeply grows aware
Of that dear Other-One, with which we share
This Earth-life. (32)

Unlike her earlier volume, where literary language focused on the materiality of the colonial scene, these poems use their surroundings to point beyond. The physical settings of the poems are merely a means to transcendence. The language of the poems is abstract and generalised, uninterested in itself as poetry. In a letter to Baughan in 1917, Swami Pragnanada of Mayaviti warned that poetry as written process might be merely a stage towards a more complex creative engagement:

Poetry is the dharma, the law of your individualised being, only you have to give up writing in order to better live it .... From poetry, the form, your soul is seeking to lose itself in poetry the substance. ... The sooner the very substance of poetry possesses the soul of a poet beyond any manoeuvring to play with rhyme, the more fortunate indeed is he or she. (6 August, 1917. MS-Papers-0198)

I began with the question posed by Viswanathan, ‘How does a focus on conversion facilitate the writing of a life story into history rather than as history’. Baughan’s conversion experience on Long Look-out writes Baughan into history in a number of ways — in terms of the Victorian fear of and incapacity before mental illness; in terms of the nineteenth-century crisis of religious faith; in terms of the Romantic configuration of landscape and the sublime, and its colonial reconfiguration; and in terms of the influence of India and Vedanta on the West. If Baughan is critically celebrated now, it is for her early writing — the 1908 volume rather than the Vedantist later works, as a colonial nationalist rather than a mystic internationalist. But perhaps the two are not opposed. Coming from an intellectual climate of religious doubt and uncertainty to a colonial setting where the newness of place demanded new ways of seeing and writing, Long Look-out gave her a further, new way of seeing, and a new landscape, one coloured by the unbounded and transcendent certainties of Vedanta.

In 1925, when she was fifty-five, Baughan experienced a second epiphany, occasioned by her falling down a flight of stairs and injuring herself. She saw ‘a point of bright light, within me yet beyond me. It was like a diamond or a star, very bright and very peaceful, very secure’ (Johnson 53). She felt a sensation of safety, of calm and of triumph. ‘I had not the sense of unity which was so strong in my first experience, but I recognised that this was the same kind of light as that which overwhelmed me then — though only a spark inside me, yet beyond the body, instead of being everywhere and with no sense of “me” at all.’

To be ‘everywhere and with no sense of “me” at all’ is the antithesis of contemporary conceptions of authorship, especially those inflected by postcolonial issues of positionality and location. But if seeing anew is the task of the colonial and postcolonial writer, it is surely also that of the mystic. Is what we see in Long Look-out a demonstration of postcolonial mysticism?
NOTES

1 In this account, Baughan is identified only as ‘B.E.B.: Case 15’. The identification of her as its subject comes from a typescript biographical memoir by her friend Berta C. Burns compiled in 1969, in the Turnbull Library, Wellington. (MS-Papers-0198, folder 6)

2 Robert S. Ellwood states that he has been unable to find evidence of formal Vedanta organisations in New Zealand (235). But a letter to Baughan from Swami Pragnananda (Nov 26th, 1916, MS-Papers-0198, folder 6, Turnbull Library, Wellington) talks of ‘Vedanta centres and clubs in New Zealand’, and in ‘Vedanta in Early New Zealand: a Tribute to Blanche Edith Baughan’ (Vedanta for East and West 116, Jan-Feb 1971, 5). Mrs Burns refers to a report in the San Francisco publication The Voice of Freedom in 1916 on ‘study classes formed by Miss Baughan under the guidance of Swami Prakasananda’.

3 A note to this poem acknowledges the influence of ‘the teaching of Plotinus, of Fechner, and of the Vedanta’.

4 If the trigger seems strange, it should be said that the medieval mystical tradition habitually used pain as an initial stage. Julian of Norwich, to whom Baughan refers in her commonplace book, experienced her visions while suffering a severe illness.

5 Again, the identification of Baughan as the subject of this passage comes from Mrs Burns’ biographical note.

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Blanche Baughan with her dog Teddy during her residence at Sumner
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/1)
Patricia Grace, one of New Zealand’s most prolific and influential Maori writers, was born in Wellington (New Zealand) in 1937, of Ngati Raukawa, Ngati Toa and Te Ati Awa tribal descent. Grace began to write while working as a primary school teacher, and her first collection of short stories, Waiariki, was published in 1975, making her the first Maori woman creative writer to publish a book in English. Her first novel, Mutuwhenua, was published in 1978, followed by a second collection of short stories, The Dream Sleepers, in 1980. Other publications include four short story collections: The Electric City and Other Stories (1987), Selected Stories (1991), Collected Stories (1994) and The Sky People (1994); three novels: Potiki (1986), Cousins (1992) and Baby No-Eyes (1998); and a variety of children’s books. She has received several grants and awards for her writing, and has been involved in a number of workshops for Maori writers.

While Grace’s early writing is characterised by a nostalgic affection for a rapidly-disappearing rural communalism, as well as an intention to instil in non-Maori readers a greater understanding of Maori cultural concepts, from the mid-1980s a more overtly polemical tone is evident in her writing. This new focus is due, at least in part, to the ideological shift triggered by the ‘Maori Renaissance’, a movement which developed in response to widespread concern about the effects of post-war developments in Maori society, as well as the inimical socio-economic effects of more than a century of Pakeha (European) hegemony. In the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of Maori began to leave their rural tribal communities in order to integrate into Pakeha society, and by the 1970s, concern over the attendant loss of traditional values and cultural practices, documented evidence of a huge reduction in the numbers of indigenes speaking Maori as a first language, and general dissatisfaction regarding political and socio-economic disparities between Maori and Pakeha, precipitated a pan-Maori objective mounted in order to address these issues.

In her writing, Grace has responded in particular to Pakeha (mis)appropriation of Maori land, a key focus of debate during (and since) the early years of the Maori Renaissance. Widespread dissatisfaction regarding past and present land grievances culminated in the great Maori Land March of 1975, a protest march which covered 700 miles in 30 days, ending at the Parliament buildings in Wellington where a petition protesting against the sale of Maori land was presented.
to the New Zealand Government. In her novels *Potiki* and *Baby No-Eyes* in particular, Grace responds to this and other well-publicised land disputes between Maori and Pakeha, and she also allegorises various incidents involving ancestral land at Plimmerton, near Wellington, where Grace now lives with her family.

In spite of the topical influences on Grace’s work, consistent throughout her writing is an interest in family and community inter-relationships, Maori mythology and oral tradition, and a skilful use of a variety of language registers as a means of individual characterisation.

The following interview took place at the National Library, Wellington, on 24th June 1999.

**MK:** I would like to start by talking about points of intersection between your latest novel, *Baby No-Eyes*, and your two previous novels, *Cousins* and *Potiki*. All three novels incorporate or allegorise landmark events in recent Maori social and political history: in *Cousins*, for example, the 1975 Maori land march features prominently in the narrative, while in *Potiki*, as you’ve pointed out in previous interviews, the land dispute in the novel is based on several factual events including the Bastion Point dispute and the Raglan Golf Course incident.

**PG:** Yes, I think what I’ve said is that the Raglan Golf Course and Bastion Point incidents legitimised *Potiki*. People have sometimes told me that they think the events in the novel are farfetched, but while the book takes things a bit further than the Bastion Point and Raglan incidents did, with the fire and flooding and so on, it was nevertheless legitimised by those events. And there have been marae buildings and a Maori church deliberately burned. My own community has, throughout several decades, been under threat of development of one kind or another and we have had to be vigilant.

**MK:** And in *Baby No-Eyes* you’ve again responded to recent land issues which have featured prominently in the media. There’s a land dispute in the novel which involves a protest occupation of a municipal garden; this appears to be modelled on the 1995 Moutoa gardens incident.

**PG:** Yes, the land occupation was modelled on the Moutoa Gardens land occupation, but the reason for the occupation was different in the novel. It was a fictional construction put together from a number of different sources and from my own knowledge base. For example, I know what goes on when we have to cater for large groups under difficult circumstances. It’s something that we’re used to doing. There’s a group dynamic that is very efficient.

**MK:** For me, the central and most striking fact-based event in *Baby No-Eyes* is not the land dispute but rather the incident which inspires the novel’s title. Your fictional representation of the story goes as follows: A pregnant woman named Te Paania is involved in a car accident and suffers a miscarriage as a result, and while she is still unconscious, her baby is thrown into a disposal bin by hospital staff and subsequently retrieved after relatives request the
body for burial. In the meantime, however, hospital staff perform an autopsy without the family’s permission and remove the child’s eyes, eventually returning them — unceremoniously stored inside a supermarket bag — to the family. Now in your author’s note at the beginning of the book, you point out that this story is based on a real event which occurred in a New Zealand hospital in 1991. So all of this actually happened?

PG: Yes, it actually happened. It didn’t happen after a motor accident, but that was about the only thing I added to the story in the novel. With the rest of the details I kept pretty close to the actual events. I interviewed a lawyer who was present at the hospital at the time it happened, and I couldn’t get the story out of my mind, and so I wanted to write about it. I felt deeply for that family, and wanted the opportunity to give that baby a life, so that was my main motivation for writing the book.

MK: The most horrifying elements of the story are firstly the moment when the anxious family receives the baby’s body only to discover that the eyes are missing, and secondly when the eyes themselves are returned separately inside a food jar which is itself placed inside a supermarket bag. The distraught family talk of their disfigured baby being turned ‘into food’, and this aspect of the story seems to become a focus for an examination of different attitudes to the body and social ritual in Maori and Pakeha society.

PG: When I heard about the supermarket bag I was horrified, because in Maori culture we don’t associate food with parts of the body. For example, we don’t put teatowels and tablecloths in the washing machine with clothing or bed linen. Nor do we sit on tables. So when I heard about the supermarket bag I had an immediate feeling of unease. And I felt really sorry for the people that it happened to. It seemed to me that it was adding insult to injury. I should point out that in the original occurrence, the baby’s eyes were not placed inside a jar (and perhaps I could have used the word ‘container’, except that it was Gran Kura’s point of view and I think she would have interpreted it as ‘jar’), but directly into the bag which was meant for groceries. This is all described from Gran Kura’s point of view. I wrote it the way I did to make it more credible. It seemed too incredible (to me) that a baby’s eyes, or any body parts, would be put directly into a plastic bag.

MK: This particular element of the narrative also seems to lead into other issues to do with bodily mutilation or desecration. For example, Mahaki — the lawyer who was present at the hospital — has a box full of files on the ethical implications of scientific research into the genetic makeup of non-European cultures, and his grandfather becomes involved in a dispute over the desecration of an ancient Maori burial site. These issues are interpreted as analogues for the disfigurement of the child’s body, and they’re similarly represented as symbolic violations of the Maori ‘body’, both in a physical
and collective sense. Over the last couple of years, there has been an increasing degree of media attention focused upon genetic modification, animal-to-human organ transplants, genetic research in isolated tribal communities and so on, and your novel seems very topical in its focus on these issues.

PG: The more I look into these matters the more I think that what happened to the baby happened for the same reason that land is taken, or cultural items, or indigenous knowledge. It’s a new area of colonisation. Researchers of the US based Human Genome Diversity Project, for example, have mapped indigenous communities living in remote places, whose genes they are targeting for research. The aim is to immortalise seven hundred endangered indigenous societies by collecting DNA and eventually patenting (thereby ‘owning’) rare cell types. These communities may not survive, so the researchers want to capture the genetic material and patent it before they disappear, or before the communities radically change. The research will not benefit these dying communities, but will benefit researchers, pharmaceutical companies and people of wealthy nations.

MK: So the novel is structured around a collection of narrative threads which are linked by this common theme of bodily invasion.

PG: Once you start on a theme, you try to stay true to that theme. I’m sure some people will think I’ve gone off on all sorts of tangents, but I myself know that I have not swerved off that path at all.

MK: Your strategy of interweaving multiple and related narrative strands is also reflected in your use of narrative perspective. Baby No-Eyes is similar to Potiki and Cousins in its multiplex narrative structure; this time you have four narrators: Te Paania, her son Tawera and her mother Kura, plus the family friend and lawyer (Mahaki) who is present at the hospital at the beginning of the novel. Each narrator tells his or her individual version of the same community story, as is the case in Potiki. Do you find the use of multiple narrators to be the best way of representing the kinds of community or familial networks which you explore in your novels?

PG: Yes, something like that. It just seems to me to be a good clear way of doing it, because it’s quite difficult to write about a lot of people. Picking them out to tell their various stories is one way of doing it. But even then, you can only highlight a certain number of people in the community, otherwise it could become quite confusing.

MK: In Baby No-Eyes, it seems that in order to differentiate these various characters, you have chosen different language registers for each narrator: Tawera, for example, uses colourful images and associations which you’d associate with a child’s point of view, while Mahaki the lawyer uses a considerable amount of legal jargon, and so on.
PG: Yes, I’ve told each person’s story in a different way: with Gran Kura, for example, she would speak in fairly standard Maori, but I’m writing in English. So in the novel I’ve given her standard English. Her language is more in the storytelling vein, without too much of the pronoun ‘I’. It’s just her telling stories. Every character needs to sound different.

MK: The choice of different language registers for different generational groups has been a feature of your writing throughout your career. In most cases, the style of language your fictional characters use can be read as an index to the linguistic changes which have taken place since the post-war period, when rapid urbanisation led to a steady decline in the use of the Maori language. So the elderly characters in your narratives — as representatives of the pre-war generation — tend to use a large number of Maori words or phrases, or grammatical structures which approximate Maori grammar rather than ‘Standard’ English. In your short stories in particular there are a number of elderly characters who use what you might call a ‘Maori English’, where Maori grammatical patterns are carried over into the English language. You’ve also used this strategy with the grandmother in Potiki, and with Mahaki’s grandfather in Baby No-Eyes. The language of the older generation is therefore contrasted with the speech of younger people, whose first language increasingly tends to be English.

PG: Yes, the language must always be right for the character.

MK: It’s surprising that there hasn’t been more critical attention paid to the distinctive and complex narrative strategies which feature in your work, particularly in your novels. In Potiki, for example, you use post-death narration: one of the central narrators, a handicapped child named Toko, is burned to death as a result of an arson attack, but he continues to tell his share of the story as he takes his place amongst the honoured dead of the community. In this way, he provides a bridge between material and spiritual worlds. In Baby No-Eyes, a similar thing happens with the miscarried and disfigured baby, who also has a posthumous life within the structure of the narrative. She communicates with her brother Tawera and her grandmother, who are able to detect her presence as a kind of spiritual force, and throughout his childhood, Tawera acts as a kind of caretaker for Baby’s spirit. This reminded me a little of Toni Morrison’s Beloved, where a dead child is reincarnated and comes back to live with her family. She is represented as a predominantly malevolent and vengeful figure, whereas in your novel, Baby seems to be a more multifaceted and multivalent presence. On one level it seems that her spirit, her wairua, has come back to keep the family company, while on another level she becomes an imaginary childhood friend for her brother Tawera. At times she seems to be an actual physical presence: at one point, for example, Tawera sustains bruising along his arms, apparently inflicted by Baby, and yet his mother thinks his wounds
may be self-inflicted. Did you intend Baby’s character to be a kind of shifting persona in the text?

PG: Yes, she could be any and all of those things: often children do have imaginary friends, companions, and Baby is also a spiritual presence in the story. Yet in other ways, her presence is very real. I left the bruising issue ambiguous: it could have been Baby who caused it, or Tawera could have done it himself. But there was also a sense of normal sibling rivalry there, a sense that Tawera was frustrated at being dominated by his sister. On the other hand, other experiences tell him that rivalry is normal in families.

MK: Child psychologists have documented a common strategy whereby bereaved children recreate the deceased sibling as a kind of phantasy figure, partly in order to alleviate their own grief but also to help the parents by becoming the ‘caretaker’ of the child’s memory. This occurs even in cases where the deceased child passes away before the grieving child is born, as is the case with Tawera and Baby in your novel. Bereaved parents also report ‘seeing’ or seeking their deceased children constantly, as Te Paania does in the novel: she speaks of being able to touch the child, to smell her, to hear her breathing ...

PG: I’m interested to hear that, because I’ve certainly gained that impression from what I’ve heard about child grief, and I’ve also met parents who’ve lost children and say they think about them and feel their presence every day.

MK: So on one level Baby’s role in the narrative can be interpreted from a psychoanalytic perspective, but equally important is the spiritual level of the narrative: towards the end of the novel, for example, Baby decides to leave Tawera and complete her journey to the spirit world, Te Po, to which all Maori souls travel after death. The Maori afterlife or mythical world features prominently in your other work, too: in Potiki, for example, you make frequent references to the well-known myth where Maui the mischievous demi-god tries to defeat death by crawling into the womb of Hine-nui-te-po, the death-goddess. The novel also interweaves Christian and Maori myths and icons: Toko’s mother Mary, for example, is impregnated by a man named Joseph, and yet the circumstances of his birth associate him not only with Christ but also with Maui, who was thrown into the sea by his mother at birth.

PG: Yes, that was something I started on at the beginning of the novel, but I lost interest in it as other aspects became important. I had been thinking about it at the time, and was asking myself: ‘Why is it that one set of stories is called “mythology”, and another set of stories is called “the truth”?’ Toko’s father could have been Joe Billy, or could have been an ancestral spirit, a poupou, a post on the wall.

MK: Your use of Maori mythology in Baby No-Eyes takes the reader right back to the beginning of time, even before creation itself, when according to Maori
mythology there was only te kore or 'the void', a kind of vacuum or empty space. There are frequent references to te kore in the novel, and in the final chapter, for example, Tawera uses the concept of te kore or empty space as a source of inspiration for the development of his talents as an aspiring artist. He, too, becomes a kind of creator, shaping his art out of the void of emptiness.

PG: Sometimes I do these things almost subconsciously at first, and then as I write I become more aware that there is something I can latch on to. That final chapter of Baby No-Eyes kind of describes the way I write. When I get really stuck I want to get back to nothing, to nothing at all, so that I can allow 'something' to come. It's a clearing. Before I began the writing of Cousins I had this idea that I was going to write about cousins, two originally, who had been brought up under very different circumstances from each other. I had no idea how I would start the novel, only that I would begin with the cousin who had nothing. Where would I put her? I put her on a street somewhere, with absolutely nothing (but later I had to go back and put a photograph in her pocket). I let her be as lonely and bereft as possible, and built her story around that. I walked her into the story. For me te kore is part of the process of writing, of searching, of starting out with nothing and making something of it. In Baby No-Eyes Tawera was an artist. His story shows that he'd been an artist all through his life. No matter what else he did in life, painting and drawing were always going to be a large part of it, and I built on this aspect of his character at the end. His sister, who had been real to him, and whose story was also part of his story, was going to be shown to the world through his art.

MK: So Tawera in a way becomes a figure for you as a writer, as a creator who shapes a narrative from the linguistic void. Further, as the first Maori woman writer to publish a novel and short story collection in New Zealand, you have played a crucial role in fostering a new literary tradition, giving voice to a people previously silenced or marginalised. This places your writing in alignment with the work of other indigenous writers throughout the world, who have similarly carved out new literary traditions in recent years. Do you follow literary developments in other colonised or formerly colonised countries such as Africa, India or the Caribbean, and do you keep up-to-date with the work of other indigenous writers of the South Pacific?

PG: I would love to be able to: I read what I can, and I pick up what I can from going to literary conferences and talking to various indigenous people. I've read some books by Carribean writers recently — some women writers, including Olive Senior. I’ve read the work of a number of African writers, including Bessie Head, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo, as well as work by native American and Canadian writers such as Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexi, and Jeanette Armstrong. I've also read some work by
Aboriginal writer Archie Weller. I keep up with as much as I can of the novels and short stories of the Pacific. I read these books because they’re by indigenous writers, but I also particularly enjoy books about communities. This is what I like about Toni Morrison too — she writes about groups of people who may live in cities or small towns. Ben Okri, Grace Paley and Eudora Welty are other examples. I’m really interested in inter-relationships: young people, old people, different age groups, people who’ve lived in a similar way to the way that I live. I live on family land in a community where everyone is related to me. I’m interested in writing about community relationships more so than partnerships, triangles, and so on.

MK: So given that you share certain preoccupations with these writers, have you ever thought of yourself as a member of a corpus of post-colonial writers?

PG: No, I don’t. I try to keep away from that sort of vocabulary and theorising. I’m aware of my work being classified, but don’t want to be influenced in any way by those classifications — or by reviews or analyses. I need to keep myself as free as I can from commentary. I have to judge my own work for myself, do things my own way, make my own choices and decisions. I must own what I do. Once a work has been published it’s been given. It’s gone.

MK: You certainly have a wide audience of readers, not just within New Zealand and other English-speaking countries throughout the world, but also in places like Russia, Japan, China, and European countries such as Germany, France and Switzerland, where there’s a strong interest in Maori and Pacific Island writing. Baby No-Eyes and Potiki, I understand, have just come out in the New Women’s Press, so that should make it easier for overseas readers to get hold of your work.

PG: I don’t always identify with what’s said about my work, but what does it matter! I’m pleased my work is being read so much by a wide variety of people, and that so many educational institutions, here and overseas, have taken it up. I appreciate the support of readers, who may have been introduced to my work through ‘post-colonial’ studies, but who have come to a much wider understanding and appreciation of it, and of the society that my work attempts to describe. I can ask myself questions about whether or not research based on one’s work is itself a type of colonisation. Is it, once again, a form of domination? You know I’m not against research of any sort. I fully understand the importance of research. But I’m against theft. I’m against appropriation — where those who are powerful use their power to take from those who have less power, and then rationalise this by saying that what they are doing is for the greater good; or that those less powerful people will benefit. They never do. It’s about sovereignty. There is nothing wrong with one group giving to another because they have absolute understanding of all aspects of what is going on and want it equally as much
for the same reasons. It needs to be a giving, not a taking. And research needs to be done primarily to benefit those about whom research is being done — who need to have the say, the power, the knowledge, the ‘sovereignty’ regarding the project.

To go back to what I was saying about my books and the question of scholarship: my books are a giving — the first act in communication. Once the book is out there I’ve done my bit. It’s gone. Anything that happens to the book after that is out of my hands, and I’ve consented to that. Whatever way the book is taken up afterwards is all to do with the next stage of the communication. Reading, reviewing, study, dissection, and commentary are all the business and work of other people — they’re all part of discussion. It may all be part of promotion and distribution as well. In other words, if the book is well received then that is encouraging to me. I benefit. I put the book out there to be read and discussed — but if I put it out there and it heads for oblivion, so be it.

MK: And do you read critical commentaries about your work?

PG: Those that come my way. I also, from time to time, read theses that focus on my work. They’re really interesting and I’m always impressed by the scholarship even though I don’t always see eye to eye with some of the things they say, or with the definitions they use in order to put theories into frameworks. Take the words ‘sovereignty’ and ‘decolonisation’, for example. To me, ‘sovereignty’ means having authority over one’s own life and culture. It is a right and something that should not have to be fought for. Terms such as ‘self-determination’ are not high enough, not good enough terms for this.

MK: So decolonisation for you is a similarly metaphysical phenomenon — to do with ideologies and attitudes rather than depopulation.

PG: ‘Decolonisation’ is what needs to happen in the minds and understandings of everyone, including Maori, so that issues can be properly addressed and equity brought about. There can’t be equality, no matter how many catch-up policies are instigated, until the issues of racism and decolonisation are addressed.

MK: Having completed Baby No-Eyes, what are your plans for your next literary project?

PG: I usually start writing short stories again after I’ve finished a novel, but this time I’ve actually started on a novel. It’s just at the stage now where I don’t know if I’ll write it or not — but I’ve been there before with all my other novels, and I just keep going with it!

NOTES

1 This involved a dispute over land, sold to the government in 1840, which in 1873 was placed into trusteeship with the express instructions that it could not be resold. In 1967
however, the government announced plans to build high-rise apartments on the land. There was immediate protest from Ngati Whatua, the original owners and inhabitants, and in 1977 a 506-day occupation was mounted. The 218 protestors were eventually removed, but in 1988 the government agreed to return the land, with compensation, to the Ngati Whatua.

The Raglan Golf Course was established on Tainui Awhiro land which was used as an emergency landing strip by government during World War II with the understanding that it would be returned to Tainui once the war ended. It was not returned however, and the golf course was established under a lease agreement with the local council. In 1978, prominent Maori activist Eva Rickard led a protest occupation of the land, which was eventually returned, with compensation, to the Tainui Awhiro.

Moutoa Gardens, in Wanganui, is situated on an area of disputed territory within a block of land purchased from local Maori by the settler government in 1848. Maori hold that Pakaitore, the area in which the Gardens is situated, was excluded from the original purchase. In 1995, a 79-day occupation of Moutoa Gardens took place in protest against a scheme introduced by the conservative National Party government, who proposed to buy off all Maori land grievances for a maximum one billion NZ dollars. An enquiry was mounted and the court ruled that Moutoa Gardens stood on council land and was therefore not a government responsibility. Anniversary commemorations of the occupation have taken place each year since the end of the occupation.
This paper posits that there is a meeting place between Theology, Australian Studies and Postcolonial studies and that it lies in the intersections of culture, the crossroads which determine spaces of otherness, identity politics and hybridity. These notions of hybridity and transformation can be found in the symbol of the cross which is constantly being transformed, mutated, corrupted and resurrected in not only visual art, but also in performance texts. These texts reflect diverse responses to organised religion(s) in Australia and its (their) association across a range of interests, from the public arena, such as government policy and social welfare, to the personal, where sexuality is regulated, exploited, and often punished. Australia, like many countries that may be considered ‘Postcolonial’, has particular stories to tell with regard to the history of ‘the cross’ as coloniser, not the least of which are those discussed in the performance texts mentioned below. These texts raise issues regarding racial, sexual, and gender persecution, as well as notions of hypocrisy, taboos and otherness. Religion has always had a dual personality in Australia. Linked with authority through connections between the judiciary and the Church of England, the Church has often been equated with the Law; the flipside of this tag being the anti-authoritarian Irish-Catholic streak that was transported with the majority of convicts. But there is also the Paradisaical notion of Australia, a place where dissenters (from Europe, especially, Germany), could find not only safe haven, but a place to ‘do God’s work’.

Jimmy Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae* in particular stresses the ambiguity and hypocrisy associated with the idea of these Christian ‘good works’. The history of the Christian missions in Western Australia is an often violent and sullied one, especially post-federation. The areas of mission that are incorporated in *Bran Nue Dae* stretch from the top end of Australia to the mid-west coastline, and throughout white history they have fallen under the religious jurisdiction of several different bodies. Reflected in this history is the ambiguous relationship between the missionaries and the Indigenous nations. The missions were for many Indigenous people the equivalent to hell, while for others they were points of
Making the Sign of the Cross

security and sustenance. Colleen McCulloch’s *The Thorn Birds*, as well as John Alsop and Sue Smith’s *Brides of Christ*, expresses the English/Irish divide in Australia as well as issues of gender and sexuality prevalent within the Roman Catholic tradition. Jane Campion’s *Holy Smoke!* illustrates the nominally Australian-Christian assumption that eastern religions are ‘inauthentic’ expressions of spirituality while Peter Kenna’s *A Hard God* explores the homosexual taboo which lies just the other side of the Australian institution of ‘mateship’, where an ever present and interventionist God will find a way to punish and shame those who cross the boundary. These ambiguities and dualisms can be seen in the way the cross itself can be viewed and defined.

The cross, according to Jungian theories of archetypes, is a symbol of transformation, a mandala, or ‘magic circle’ that signifies change and focuses attention on the union of the four-sided figure (Fischer 30–31). The sign/ing of the cross in Christian liturgy and practice incorporates penance, redemption, sin, and most importantly, memory. The crucifix, which depicts Jesus’ body, holds a special place within Roman Catholicism, but in performance texts is often used to indicate an unhealthy or superficial piety, as seen in Peter Kenna’s *A Hard God*. Or it is used as a constant reminder that God, ‘who sacrificed his only begotten son’, is watching, a kind of ‘big brother’ feeling, as noted in the scenes set in the dormitories in *Brides of Christ*. The cross is also a symbol of colonisation in New Testament times evidenced through one significant crucifixion that took place 2000 years ago. But more portentously, it is the metonymic symbol for Christianity and its missionary (colonising) work via the Bible. In Australia the cross could be seen to represent the symbolic ‘crucifixion’ or genocide of the Indigenous peoples through the intercession/interference of missionaries and other Christian groups in the status and wellbeing of Indigenous families and communities during the twentieth century in particular. These are the generations that have come to be known as ‘The Stolen Generations’. In theory, as Patrice Pavis suggests, the cross represents the intersecting of these differing territories and sites of otherness, or the ‘crossroads of culture’ that both intersect and diverge (Pavis 6).

This intersection is clearly depicted in Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae* through the character of Fada Benedictus, a German missionary representative of both the German Pallotine Order who worked along the western coast of Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the mainly French Cistercians who had established missions as early as the 1890s, but who were forced to abandon the missions for various reasons. One of the reasons cited for the Cistercian withdrawal was that the ‘Aborigines were a race of people such as it seems impossible to convert to the true faith’ (Wyart in Harris, 437). Broome itself, where some of *Bran Nue Dae* is set, has a history of racial mixing, largely between the Filipinos and the Indigenous Australians, mainly due to the highly active pearling industry. The Filipinos, however, unlike the Aborigines, were already used to the Catholic regime due to their Spanish connections. Benedictus is a
character of such dualisms and contradictions who illustrates the good and the bad, the past and the present European characteristics for the community in *Bran Nue Dae*. This spatial and cultural crossing is highlighted when Benedictus makes a cross from Cherry Ripe bars in order to carry out the blessing for the Aboriginal community that he ‘serves’ and services in both the biblical and the ministering sense, all too truly reflecting an aspect of the history of ‘the Cross’ under the Southern Cross. This echoes Thomas Merton’s concerns that the Cross can no longer be authoritatively claimed as a symbol of mercy throughout the colonised world but, rather, as Merton acknowledges, the Cross is encountered as

a sign of contradiction — destroying the seriousness of the Law, of the Empire, of the armies.... But the magicians keep turning the Cross to their own purposes. Yes, it is for them too a sign of contradiction: the awful blasphemy of the religious magician who makes the Cross contradict Mercy! This, of course is the ultimate temptation of Christianity! (Merton 32–33)

It is very clear that for the community in *Bran Nue Dae* there are times when Merton’s ‘Mercy’ has been overtaken by its antithesis, cruelty. For Chi, the cross is a symbol of prosperity and poverty, gluttony and starvation, the corporate church versus the individual soul, and black versus white. These binaries are not the Indigenous way and Chi illustrates this through consistently challenging the actions and falsity of the established Church which clearly dictates one rule for whites and another for blacks. His characters parody and mock the church (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) through the very symbol which is said to uphold and guide it. The Church’s memory symbol has been converted to a re-memory symbol that forces the Church to re-member what that symbol originally encapsulated.

The cross, of course, is not the only sign that serves as a symbol of colonisation and contradiction. Vestments, in particular, collars — be they priestly or otherwise — represent the march of colonisation, as well as the separation of the cloistered from the world, or from reality. This is clearly outlined in Joseph Conrad’s turn of the century European text *Heart of Darkness*, in which the collar serves to represent both the devastation of the Indigenous peoples of the Congo and their acculturation, as well as the vain attempts of the colonisers (in this case, the company accountant) to cling to what they believe are the vestiges of ‘civilisation’. The starched white collar and accompanying white vestments are the accountant’s link to the world of light, they separate him from the dark ‘savages’ of the Congo. The irony, of course, is the suggestion that he has had to resort to savagery in order to achieve the ‘civilising’ of the ‘native’ washer-woman he has chosen as the valet for his garments.

In *Bran Nue Dae* Father Benedictus’ collar and robes serve to heap both power and respect upon him, they are a symbol of mission within the wilderness, of civilisation and of learning. The reality of course, is far removed: just as the accountant’s collar is more ridiculous for the reader than respectable, Benedictus’ clothes serve as symbols of oppression and highlight the level of hypocrisy he
has achieved. In short, they serve to remind the reader/audience that just as the cross for Merton has become the opposite of Mercy, so too have the priestly vestments become the antithesis of Christian values. This is cleverly depicted through the use, yet again, of Mars Bar wrappers and Cherry Ripe wrappers as patterns on the clerical stoles in Bran Nue Dae.

Through Bran Nue Dae we can see that there is a possible union point, a meeting place for theology and Australian studies, and that it lies in these trans-symbolic figures, in ‘these crossroads’ of ‘culture’ — but, in the tradition of the cross’s history, this meeting is not necessarily a ‘happy or holy occasion’.

CRUX: INTERSECTIONS AND DUALISMS

As illustrated, this meeting place can be found not only in canonical texts such as Conrad’s, but in popular performance texts, namely film (Holy Smoke, Sirens), the mini series (The Thorn Birds, Brides of Christ), and theatre in the forms of vaudeville (Shepherd on the Rocks), drama (A Hard God), and, as already demonstrated, musical parody (Bran Nue Dae). The religious content of these forms, however, is often neglected in favour of the explicit/implicit sexual content — what Peter Malone refers to as ‘The Thorn Birds’ Syndrome’ (Malone 64). This attention, in my view, is not misplaced, in fact, it is often prophetic and accurate, as in the case of Schepsi’s 1976 film The Devil’s Playground. Indeed, even in the seemingly improbable relationship between Meggie Cleary and the Roman Catholic priest, Ralph de Bricassart, in Colleen McCulloch’s The Thorn Birds, there is a form of truth.

Jane Campion’s recent film Holy Smoke highlights this association of sex with religion through use of publicity materials framed as tabloid articles and slander, which promote the titillating and sexual side of the film, the eroticism of Ruth, and the humiliation and kinkiness of PJ, while totally ignoring the emotional and spiritual growth theses characters achieve. The work, however, whether we like the film or not, is much deeper than Kate Winslet discarding her clothes or urinating in the desert.

While I am not arguing for the brilliance of this film, well-rounded character definition or theological soundness, I would advocate that all self-respecting Australian theologians and religious practitioners view it — it is a window into the debate about spirituality and the search for meaning taking place in the twenty-first century from an Australian context. For example, the film raises questions about the spiritual barrenness of Australian men in particular and the search for meaning that Australian women are supposedly engaging in, or are at least open to — is this a true reflection of the Australian spiritual condition? If it is, should Australian theologians be asking why the questers in this film both confuse or seek to discover, whichever it is, sexual and spiritual transcendence concomitantly, and why Ruth returns to India? Do they need to engage in theories about ‘the body’ in order to discover the cause of the failure of mainstream Christianity to
capture, (for want of a better phrase), the youth market? We know from Kristevan and Barthesian notions of intertextuality and Bakhtin’s dialogism, that a text:

is … never finished, written once and for all; it exists in the continuing time of its intertextual production, which includes the texts of its future (those that are brought to its reading). (Heath 259)

I would suggest that *Holy Smoke* is one such text that should have a life beyond the screen in the reading practices of theology, where classic philosophical, hermeneutic and theological texts are brought to the reading of the film, along with that great example of intertextuality — the Bible. This reading partnership is one way that we can validate contemporary popular texts as theological or spiritual partners, and not only in the Western Christian arena, but as Campion’s film shows, within the Eastern traditions (and, possibly, Indigenous ones as well).

**Colonising ‘Othered’ Bodies**

Just as clothes have functioned as signifiers of difference in the aforementioned texts, so too does sexuality delineate the ‘othered’ in society, especially in accordance with Christian morals and notions of dualism. Ruth in *Holy Smoke!* represents the uncontrollable and messy female body unable to stay ensconced in her cocoon-like sari, but what of other marginalised sexualities? For example, Joe, the homosexual son in *A Hard God*, who declares to his friend and potential lover Jack:

*Joe:* Listen, I want to tell you something. If you do go away without me I’m finished with the Church.

*Jack:* You wouldn’t do such a thing.

*Joe:* I swear I would. Because it was the Church that said we shouldn’t see each other again.

[...]

And I’ll tell you what else I’ll do if you leave me here. I’ll go with other men. You’ll be responsible for that too.

*Jack:* It’s your soul, Joe. (Kenna 70–71)

This is certainly not the picture of complete indoctrination hoped for, especially from and Australian/Irish Catholic playwright, but rather a healthy questioning and dissection of Church logic and dogma. Kenna’s *A Hard God* was only one of several plays and films to appear in the 1970s, post Vatican II, post Vietnam, and during the great worldwide trend away from the church, that began to search for answers in regard to emerging teenage sexualities in dialogue in particular with the Roman Catholic Church in Australia and projecting backwards, to Ireland. These plays are not merely spurious accounts told by the disenchanted, they are criticisms and explorations crafted by the disenfranchised who have found a voice. They are, I would argue, documents relevant to a cultural theology for Australia.
The interest for us, as Malone has elucidated, is what happens in the stories when the coloniser and the colonised desire each other, and that desire breaches the ‘purity’ of ‘man’s’ relationship to God as in The Thorn Birds? When Ralph is asked to choose between God and Meggie — surely there is the opposite of good in this situation? Ah, say the theologians, what God has done is still ‘good’. They would be right, and that is the point — it is not God but the Church and Ralph himself who have created the situation. Meggie is quite aware that the blame lies squarely in the human arena. Ralph belongs to the colonising church, but has himself been colonised by it and by the church’s ambitions for him, so, is therefore colonised and coloniser. Meggie unable to cope with the hypocrisy pleads (in the mini-series) ‘I thought you loved me Ralph’ and Ralph asserts ‘I do Meggie … but I love God more’ — a wonderful plundering of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar by McCulloch, who has transformed Brutus’ line, ‘Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more’ — and there lies the rub (III.ii, my emphasis). What ensues incorporates guilt, repression, suffering, conflict, substitution, escape, and multiple deaths. What does this say about a god who is supposed to be loving? If the God of the 1970s and 1980s in Australian writing and performance is still what was once termed an ‘Old Testament God’, one of wrath, plague and famine, where are we now? How can this vision of God be reconciled with the imago dei evolving in postmodern culture, as Ntozake Shange, the black Aermican poet famously declared, ‘i found god in myself, and i loved her, i loved her fiercely’ (Shange 63). How does the church respond to this feminist or pantheistic image of god?

These few texts alone indicate that there is a dialogue in Australian popular culture about God and spirituality, and much of it is centred around the limitations of the institutionalised churches with their history of oppression and interference, clearly introducing the language of post-colonial theory with its lexicon of representation, hybridity, otherness, subjectivity, desire, dislocation, and also, aspects of its hermeneutics — feminism and queer theory — in short, liberation. Chi’s Bran Nue Dae picks up this lexicon. Through using a very middle class, Western performance form, the stage musical, he and Kuckles parody the churches, the government, and even the audience who ‘patronise’ the show. While there is still debate about whether or not these textual forms are truly subversive, a post-colonial approach is still worth persevering with because of the illumination and possibilities about the text that surface (for instance, see D'Cruz 1–14).

Bran Nue Dae: Transgressing Desires and Playing with the Lord

In Bran Nue Dae Chi captures the sexual ambiguity of spiritual language that would see itself as separate from notions of sex and eroticism. Love for Jesus, the Lord, is expressed in language reminiscent of love poems and fantasy, it is not supposed to be taken literally but spiritually in a pure and chaste manner as in Song of Songs. Act One ends with a mood steeped in sexuality and sensuality,
where the sexual act is likened to ‘sucking ripe bush bananas’ (46). Later, in Act Two, the community is by the mangroves collecting kuckles which becomes a form of courting or even foreplay. This natural and realistic attitude towards sexuality is disturbed by the Pentecostals who barge in, inappropriately dressed for the mangroves wearing robes of Transfiguration white (symbolising their difference from the rest of the community), singing lyrics that are probably more sexually explicit than the community’s. This is especially true of Theresa who enters in a state of rapture or bliss, not unlike the condition she disturbs in Slippery and Marijuana Annie as she sings:
All the way Jesus, just all the way Lord
Bend me and shape me, give you your reward.
Let me lie in your body, when I'm wracked in my pain
And just light up the loving, that always remains

Perhaps not quite as crudely suggestive as the lyrics that preceded them:

Ooh ooh ooh! Ooh ooh ooh
Everybody lookin' for kuckle
Everybody lookin' all day
Everybody lookin' for kuckle
Blackman, whiteman, and grey,

Poppa he lookin’ for kuckle
Poppa he lookin’ all day
Mumma bin say he got kuckle
Poppa bin sing out hooray
[...]
Just gip me while you rip me
Rip me while you gip me
Gip me while you rip me
Oh yeah – OOH OOH-OOH! (58)

The juxtaposition of the spiritual sense of the Pentecostal’s lyrics about Jesus to the sexual scene (set to the Kuckle lyrics) that the Pentecostals have disturbed, highlight’s the spiritual lyric’s other sense: the sense of desire and taboo so suppressed by the very nature of Pentecostalism. This is very much a site of rupture, of play, that opens the audience to several truths and interpretations. Chi’s humour ensures that we are not offended, but are rather, enlightened. For theologians and religious sociologists, Bran Nue Dae’s treatment of sex is important because it indicates through the symbols of costumes, sets and props, as well as through the language of the pastors and disciples within the play, that all denominations have been conflated into a hybrid of Roman Catholic Pentecostalism that speaks with a Lutheran accent, saying one thing and performing another. This indicates that all the churches are culpable with regard to crimes — both sexual and emotional, towards the Indigenous population and beyond. These crimes include not just the secret participation in the sexual act, but also the suppression of sexual urges that we have seen surfacing in the other works. It also illustrates quite clearly through this juxtaposing of scenes that it is not the sexual act which is the crime, it is the hypocrisy and the cover-up that inflicts the damage: damage not only to those immediately involved, including and especially the offspring, but also, to the reputation of Christianity as a whole, and therefore to the Christian God. In a sense, intercourse has also become a metonymic symbol for Christianity. Chi has managed, through parody and satire, to plant the notion that it is now the discrete colonising groups, namely, the churches, that are being viewed as one dangerous
and homogenised mass that needs to be saved, rather than those they have come to colonise. The irony of the patronising tone should not be lost on the Australian churches.

*Bran Nue Dae* also raises issues of dualism. Fada Benedictus is constantly preaching fire and brimstone dualism, his world is one which is black and white, in which we are creatures, or fallen angels, that must crawl from the darkness towards the light, or in terms of the Indigenous population, they will become *Lux in tenebris* — light in spite of their own darkness (10). Dualism incorporates clear cut kinship rules and a linear timeline — there is something very definite to be achieved — the release of the soul from this flesh prison on a journey to God. Ironically it is Benedictus himself who controverts that timeline and enters into a
complex pattern of kinship when he fathers Slippery to Theresa. He not only becomes father to Slippery, he becomes father to Willie, cousin/brother to Tadpole and uncle to countless other offspring within the kinship group. His view of the world is now simply inadequate: the missionary who had come to border country to convert the ‘other’ has now become ‘othered’. His life must leave behind notions of dualism and incorporate hybridity and compromise. His forbidden desires have gone towards making the ‘whole world aboriginal’ thus contravening the intentions of the mission.

*Bran Nue Dae* does offer the Churches hope, however, in the form of hybridity. Towards the end Benedictus claims:

Ve are all angels und devils
Creatures of darkness and bodies of light ...
Lux in tenebris
[...]
Dere is no beginning and dere is no end
In our long journey through life...

Tadpole responds with alacrity:

That’s what I bin trying to tell you mob
From the beginning, I bin drovin’ and
Drinkin’ and drovin’ and anyway … (Chi 84)

Benedictus’ statement about journey is quite radical in terms of *his* theology, for he would be the first to recite that ‘in the beginning was the word …’. For Benedictus and the community it seems that there is no *beginning*, only journey, no linear narrative, but a cyclical one, and a future walked together. So, here we have popular culture quite accurately reflecting the dis/ruption of contemporary theology, and the cross being transformed yet again. An aspect of this transformation and disruption can be clearly seen in the logo designed by Aboriginal artist Bronwyn Bancroft for Anne Pattel-Gray’s collection of essays *Aboriginal Spirituality* in which the ‘Serpent, a symbol of Aboriginal Spirituality, is juxtaposed against the cross which is the symbol of White spirituality in Christianity’ — quite a remarkable partnership considering the serpent’s history within the Christian story (Patel-Gray, frontispiece). The above mentioned texts are a challenge to all who contemplate a life lived in Christ, or a life lived without, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They question the relevance of a relationship with a transcendent being, and how to either reconcile or separate the Church from/to God, because they are cultural artefacts about people who have tried to do just that, or who are in the process of still wrestling that particular angel.
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Paul Sharrad

ST FRANCIS CHURCH, COCHIN
[1503 Portuguese, 1776 Dutch, 1795 British, 1949 Church of South India]

Dropping free of the blue tinted cool onto hot sand, they trust to collective carapace, elbow through the call, dart, tug of predatory gulls to sanctuary.

These busloads shuffle in and genuflect to scuff off footwear, scattered piles an untidy reliquary.

Discalced, they mill and hum processing aimlessly cross pews and aisles; three tour-guides speak in tongues of history — English, Dutch — give witness to salvation of discovery and trade (not much remains in Portuguese). The East redeemed, da Gama’s bones were transubstantiated home to Europe; photos show the mystery of the roped-off floor; how was it mild Franciscans left their birds to tend the tombstone of a murderer?
But fortunes turned.
The honest Dutch rebuilt the church
a tall fort, rock solid,
buttressed, same style
as the warehouses busily
mouldering downtown.
God's godown, then, for harvesting
of souls, each to be sorted
by regulations One to Ten
displayed in cold white lettering
beside the company Creed
and plaques to defunct shareholders.

In the fickle trade of time
stocks fluctuated like the
damoclean punkah bars
that fanned the faithful
(outside pagans winnowing their words
with each pull on a rope).
Translated gravestones
Declare flatly that
'here nothing lies';
the smooth impression
of your ancestors is all
you get. The cameras click.

I turn away
a surfeit,
and there — quite perfect
in its stillness, past
the crows' complaining
and a vendor's thin flute, just
a wall, pure white in morning
sun that cuts a sundial slant
crisp black of shutter. Such
a bright blankness frames
a bowl of white begonias
in a darkened room, brooding,
the calm contemplation all
instantly, utterly
itself.
Charlene Rajendran

Charlene Rajendran is a freelance teacher, writer and theatre practitioner. Exploring Malaysian voices through writing and theatre, she is particularly interested in issues of identity as an urban Malaysian woman. She is also involved in engaging young people in the process of self-expression using drama workshops and creative writing.

Charlene has performed, directed and produced for the theatre, mostly Young People's Theatre, Five Arts Centre. She is a member of Five Arts Centre, a performing and visual arts collective that is committed to exploring the arts with a Malaysian voice and perspective. Her involvement in the theatre began when she was a teenager. She performed for Janet Pillai in Teater Kanak-Kanak (Children's Theatre) productions organised by the National Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur from 1978–1981.

She has since written plays and poems for performance, often collaborating with a creative team to create texts that draw on the experiences and views of the performers. She often uses music in her presentations as she is interested in the way music provides a means of access to the emotions and inner thoughts that words alone do not. She has also experimented with her voice in some Five Arts Centre productions which have used music.

Charlene has conducted several creative workshops for young people and adults, and was one of the main facilitators of Teater Muda, an integrated arts workshop program for young people from 1992–1995. Mangosteen Crumble, a book of poems published in Malaysia by Team East in March 1999, was the result of her participation in a Writers' Workshop led by Mohan Ambikaipaker. Since then she has done readings in Kuala Lumpur, Lisbon and in the UK (London, Oxford, Cambridge and Durham).

Charlene has taught English Language and Literature at secondary and tertiary levels, having had the opportunity to design a course on Issues of Identity in South East Asian Literature. She has also written Teachers' Kits for secondary school teachers based on a Theatre-in-Education performance, a technology exhibition and short stories written by Malaysian teenagers. In 1999 she began Labyrinth, a series of workshops for young people looking at literature through drama, using theatre exercises and creative writing to explore a literary text. In 2000 Charlene was awarded an Arts Network Asia grant to conduct Asian Labyrinths, a project that includes using the Internet to work with a group of young people from Malaysia and the Philippines.

Charlene has a degree in English and Philosophy from the University of Durham (1987) and a Masters in Linguistics from the University of York (1988).
SO MUSH OF ME

So mush of me is English.
My dreaded colonial heritage.
From Enid Blyton to Beatrix Potter
my idylls lie distant in Yorkshire.

So mush of me lives Anglo.
My dreaded white inheritance.
From Laura Ashley to Marks & Spencer
my istanas all built in Windsor.

So, mush of me
misplaced.
Really I am Malaysian,
Ceylonese, Tamil,
Anglophile, All.
Mingled by history
not choice.

So, mush of me
misfit.
My outfits all merge
and combine.
From kurungs of kashmere
to kain batik ballgowns,
my palate eats roast beef
with rice.

So mush of me
mixed up,
sejarah
that spans a globe.
From Perth to Papua
Toronto to Trent,
my saudaras
by boat and by flight.

So mush of me is
muddled.
Malaysian, Ceylonese
Unsure.
My anglicised fancies
in tempatan dreams
make mush
in so mush of me
SMOKED HAM AND SWEAT WEDDING

(i)

The blazing sun hangs a heavy humidity on the burring fans.

Selendangs flirt
blazers slung.

Sweat drips
awaiting,
    awaiting,
    the arrival.

'It's different if you have a daughter.
My sons are all quite charming.
But what will I do with my jewellery?'

A piquant siren cracks open the caution of unspoken sentiment.

'Tonight they'll swipe him.'

Guests glazing skywards.
Glasses clunk in collusion.

Helicopters harangue a household of daughters.
Doors are broken, father taken.

    Stripping the jewels
    off ancient temples
    for a crown.
Chairs pewed to position,  
arching golden chrysanthemums.  
aisled in pastel carnations.  

Flipping canopy bristles  
the 'hello's, 'how are you's  
into 'how now's, 'what to do's,  
awaiting,  
awaiting,  
the arrival.  

'The bugger quit drinking.  
Religion has ginned him.  
Rolling his tongue in a sweet sparkling juice.  
Nothing will drown him but soda.'  

Blinking blood trucks.  
Blocking passage, barging entry.  

'These are orders. Quick disperse.'  

Guests strained to listen in the explodes of a distance.  

A crowd surging forward,  
finding fumigation forces.  
Tears, burns, itches, twitches,  
crust the nerves.  

Stinging whips  
cast servants and serfs  
under rule.
Cream festoons, salmon ribbons, crimson carpet carves the bridle.

Awaiting, awaiting, the arrival.

Rolling sandpaper bellies spill through saffron silk sarees. Pedicure varnish toes twiddle peacock crepe kebayas.

‘Why not serve salads, some roast or cold cuts da? Rice and curry hardly fits in Carcosa Seri Negara. Though smoked ham would cause quite a sweat!’

Scuffles transcend into polished Black Marias.

‘The trouble is theirs now.’

Guests glazed in gossip. Baiting clues, juicing views.

Batons raised with voices pounding down on bended knee. Helmets smashed by stone and gravel. Hoarse and hoary in pith.

Liberated from Federated, Resident Governor to Prime Minister, Fooling with fates in a farce.
(iv)

Carcosa sits smug
on a history clad hill.
Built to cushion
in poppy-
cock whims
a British Governor.
High Commissioner.
then the Queen of E
no less.

Merdeka Square poses
a prickly heat protest.
Meant to curtail
the crony-
crap schemes.
of Prime Minister.
Attorney General.
then the High Courts
no less.

Union Jack once lowered.
Jalur Gemilang now cowered.

The bridal couple pose
at the top of the stairs
in a starkness
of history
and helplessness.
Uncles, aunties, cozens, sneezes,
extending the extended families,
occasional variation of species
features foreigners married
to ours.

‘Maybe they’l settle in Australia or something.
After all they’v money and she won’t convert.
Tomorrow they’ll come for the children.’

Bleating horns succumbed by smoky gasses.

‘It’s cleared up — no hassles.’

An emptiness strutting
the streets with closed doors.
Dusk is dawdling,
the flagpole yaws.

The couple wave fingers
in a frozen fecundity,
caressing a stare
in a motionless terror.

Carcosa trees light up.
Merdeka trees sprite up.

The guests have dispersed.
The crowds now disbursed.
The hotel room overlooks
Parliament.
Carcosa Seri Negara, located in 40 acres of landscaped gardens, was built at the turn of the last century in truly colonial splendour. It served initially as the official residence to the British Resident of the Federated Malay States, who would later become the British Governor of Malaya, Frank Swettenham. After independence, it became the residence of the British High Commissioner, until it was returned to the Malaysian Government towards the latter part of the century. It is now an extremely exclusive hotel, and its first guest was Queen Elizabeth II.

Merdeka Square is a historic spot in Kuala Lumpur, where the lowering of the Union Jack in 1957 marked the end of British colonial rule. It now boasts the tallest flagpole in the world, where the Jalur Gemilang, a name conferred on the Malaysian flag, flies supreme. More recently it has been the site of several human rights demonstrations, including the eventful rallies led by former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, soon after his dismissal from office, and just before his arrest.

The two are located close to each other, with the High Court and Parliament buildings, in close proximity.

Charlene Rajendran
Oct 2000
SUE HOSKING

‘It’s Not a Story. It’s History’

In 1844 George Fyfe Angas promoted South Australia as a ‘model colony’, possessing ‘a more highly moral, religious and intelligent population with Christian privileges than any other of our colonies’ (Pike 138). Our model settlement was supposed to be ardent in its concern for Aborigines. In South Australia, we are now beginning to face up to that promotion as myth.

The genre of Aboriginal life narrative is seriously under-represented, in fact barely existent, in South Australia. Recently, however, numbers of Aboriginal people in this state have begun to tell the stories of their lives. One of these is Clem O’Loughlin.

Clem O’Loughlin is a contemporary Aboriginal man, born on Point Pearce Mission on the York Peninsula, South Australia in 1934. According to the records, he ‘ceased to be an Aborigine’ in 1948, when his family was served exemption papers.¹ His father was a sober, hard-working family man, deemed capable of making his way alone in the white world. That was not what he wanted, for himself or his children, but that is what Clem inherited. Clem’s story demonstrates the absurd, immoral and dangerous lie that would separate decency, determination and the capacity for hard work from Aboriginality.

I have been working with Clem, on and off, for two years. We are working together to produce a book which will represent the life of Clem O’Loughlin, told in his own voice. Our work is collaborative and involves numerous consultations and negotiations. When the book is finished, I will think of it as Clem’s book. I do not expect to have my name on it. What I claim, though, is the right to tell what I have learned from working with Clem. We come from different worlds. Our worlds have overlapped in the production of Clem’s book. For me that has been one of the most simultaneously rewarding and unsettling experiences of my life. My story, told separately, is my version of that experience. To some extent my version is a series of confessions. I made a lot of mistakes.

When we first met Clem and I got on like a house on fire. Clem seemed to have no difficulty chatting to me, until I switched on the tape recorder. Although the dictaphone we now use is small and unobtrusive, it is still the case that Clem reveals more of himself when the dictaphone has been switched off. From the beginning, Clem has had a sense of what belongs in his book, and what does not. Our ideas on this do not correspond. Clem’s greatest worry over our project is
that he will not have enough to tell me — not enough for a book. After two years I begin to understand his concern. Of course he has a story, but how much can he tell me?

My concern is: What kind of mongrel story are we making together? Where does it fit? Who will want it?

I know, from previous experience, that commercial publishers are more likely to accept manuscripts with a marketable degree of sex and violence, although few would be so crass as to put it that way in relation to Aboriginal narrative. I find myself increasingly curious about what Clem hints at — the dysfunctional aspects of his marriage, the period of alcoholism, neglect of the children, experiences of racism, brushes with the law, subversive acts against authority. I think that non-Aboriginal readers would respond more dramatically to Clem’s achievements if they knew exactly what he has overcome. What I thought we would be producing was a masculine equivalent of Ruby Langford’s Don’t Take Your Love To Town.

I entered our collaborative venture with some fancy ideas about narrative. I did not recognise those ideas as fancy or academic. I still refer to Clem’s ‘story’. I did not realise it, to begin with, but he does not like that word ‘story’.

I know I am switching tenses. Somehow, in this project, it is difficult to find the right tense. The past is so much in the present. I would like to be able to convey that. I ask Clem why he wants to put his ‘story’ into a book. He tells me that others have told him he should do this — whitefellas. One of these people is a former principal of Taoundi Aboriginal College, where Clem worked as a driver, driving instructor, and when I met him as a general do-anything employee (an ill-defined position which disappeared with funding cuts one year short of twenty-five years of service). Eventually Clem tells me that he wants to put his life into a book for his grannies — his twenty-five grandchildren. One of those grandchildren is AFL superstar Michael O’Loughlin, of the Sydney Swans. Another is Ricky O’Loughlin, just beginning his career with the Adelaide Crows. Oh dear. I can not claim to be fanatical about football.

Looking back over our very first transcript I see how determined I am to tread a familiar path. I do not know what ‘book’ means to Clem. At the time I did not know that Clem had only read one book from cover to cover, and that was about the life of an alcoholic actress — something he had to read during a rehabilitation program. He can not remember the name of the actress. It would have been Lillian Roth, who wrote I’ll Cry Tomorrow, used by Alcoholics Anonymous. I think that Clem will start talking at the beginning and talk through to the end. I think I am going to be shaping an oral narrative so that it reads well as text. I think he has the story, and I am the wordsmith. But it is not as simple as that.

Sue: So do you think of yourself as a bit of a storyteller? Mary-Anne’s told me that a lot of people around here think of you as a story-teller and that you’ve always got ...
Clem: Well, no. I've been talking about history ... ?
Sue: Is talking about history talking about the past?
Clem: Yes.
Sue: That's what you want to put in the book?
Clem: Mm.
Sue: So it's an autobiography?
Clem: Mm.
Sue: Your story.
Clem: Mm. Ok?
Sue: Yeah. Ok.
Clem: We'll start it now?

[Laughter]

Sue: I did say something in the letter about how there are misunderstandings ...
Clem: Sure. I don't worry about that.
Sue: Well I think this is your story. I'm doing it because I'm an academic and I'm interested in your story and I want to help you put it in a book. That's all I want out of it.
Clem: Ok. I don't care if I get anything out of it. I want to show my kids later on. Grannies.
Sue: Absolutely!
Clem: Twenty-five or more.

[Laughter]

Sue: Twenty five of them waiting to read it!
Clem: Twenty five grannies. Yeah.

I had never experienced a close working relationship with an Aboriginal man before. Clem and I were 'matched', as it were, by people associated with the Aboriginal community college at Port Adelaide. Clem needed a writer. I was known to have an interest in Aboriginal life writing and to have served what you might call an 'apprenticeship' in producing such stories through some involvement with Veronica Brodie, whose autobiography is due to be published by Wakefield Press in 2001. Clem and I agreed to meet.

I wrote a letter to Clem. ‘Dear Clem ... ’ I told him about my childhood, close to Port Adelaide, where Clem lives. I told him about my grandfather, with whom I lived as a child. My grandfather was a merchant seaman and later boiler inspector on the wharves there. I did not tell Clem that the Smiths were first settlers at Birkenhead, next to the Port. I did not say that my grandfather had fought as a volunteer fireman at the Sugar Works by the Port River — the Sugar Works that had poisoned the land where Veronica Brodie’s Kaurna ancestors had been traditional owners at the time of settlement. I included a photo with the letter. When I stuck the stamp on the envelope, I noted that it was one in a series of roses. Somehow, what I was doing had the feeling of a courtship. Curiously, I was making the advances.
When I went to Tauondi Aboriginal College to meet Clem my sense of what our relationship might be immediately evaporated. I thought we would at least have Port Adelaide in common, but when I entered the gates of the Aboriginal college I was in a different place: out of place. The photograph was redundant. Everyone knew who I was looking for.

It took me a long time to admit that we might have different views on what was most interesting in Clem’s life. After three sentences I was quizzing him about why he was born over thirty miles from Point Pearce, at Wallaroo, rather than close-by in Maitland Hospital. He did not know. Later, reading what Eileen W烷aneen had to say in *Point Pearce: Past and Present*, I discovered what it means for a pregnant woman to be sent from Point Pearce to Wallaroo.

All my children were born at Wallaroo Hospital. We have to go in with an open buckboard, nothing decent. Sometimes some of the women would get their babies on the road. (31)

Later again, researching State Records, I discovered that Maitland Hospital would not take the Aboriginal women. A shilling a week was deducted from the wages of Point Pearce men to build a special wing at Maitland hospital, but it did not happen. What do I do with this information that did not come from Clem?

I know I am too interested in Clem’s mother. I push Clem for domestic details but I can not get enough. He tells me that his mother was ‘a ordinary housewife’. In revising the transcript he crosses out ‘ordinary’. Is this a concession to me? What Clem remembers best about his mother is sitting on her lap in an A Model Ford. He was eight or nine. His mother let him steer the car.

It is his father he really wants to talk about. It is clear that Clem idolised his father. He tells me how all he wanted was to go rabbiting with Dad. He tells me about his father’s successes as a shearer. He tells me about the generator his father made. He tells me about his father’s funeral, when Clem was eighteen.

The story that most amazes me is the story of Clem’s marriage to Cecilia. Because Clem’s father was served exemption papers, against his will, the family had to leave Point Pearce. They set up home nearby, in Moonta. They have relatives on Point Pearce. Clem is obviously sneaking back onto the Mission. *I’m back in the present tense. I’m there.*

Clem gets a girl pregnant. He marries her. It is expected. Because, technically, Clem is no longer an Aboriginal, Cecilia can leave the Mission. She is exempted — married, technically, to a white man. But she does not want to leave her family. Clem can not stay. She will not go. Clem can not even visit his new wife without permission from the authorities. He sets up residence just outside the Mission boundary. There are others like him — exempted people who want to stay close to their relatives, to the place they still think of as home. They build shacks out of any old scrap they can salvage, from the dump, or wherever. They call the place
Hollywood. This is where the non-exempted people come for drink. The place becomes notorious.

I am much too curious about the marriage. The first child is born on Point Pearce, a daughter, Muriel. At some point Cecilia leaves the Mission to live with Clem. I suspect the authorities made her. Her health is bad. There are more children. Clem and Cecilia drink a lot. Clem tells me this off tape. They separate, but Clem continues to support his family. Clem has the opportunity to further his education in Adelaide. One of the children is desperately ill. Cecilia's family move to Salisbury, closer to Adelaide, to be near the hospital. Clem moves to the other side of town, to Port Adelaide, where he has regular work. Clem and Cecilia live separately, but stay in regular contact. They go back to York Peninsula together, frequently. They fish. They watch football. Clem says 'Cecilia put up with a lot. Any other woman would have left me'.

There is a lot of story missing. I wonder whether Cecilia will talk to me. Clem says he will ask. Cecilia says no. 'Why,' says Cecilia, 'would she want to talk to me?'

When I ask Clem about his other children he seems a bit vague.

'Muriel. And then Clem .... I've got more, haven't I?'

Clem looks to me to know. I look to him to know.

'I'll ask Cecilia,' he says.

Next time we meet he gives me two typewritten pages from Cecilia. I am too delighted. All the details of the children are there, but Cecilia has written as if she is Clem. I suggest that Cecilia might want to write a chapter about the children. What I really want is the two stories, standing side by side, but separate. This is not what Clem had in mind.

Later, when the dictaphone is off, Clem tells me that he and Cecilia are very sorry for times when they neglected their children. He tells me shame stuff. This is the kind of thing that would sell the book, but it is not meant for the book. This will be one of the silences in the story.

I remember a warning passed on to a friend of mine, Anne Bartlett. She has been commissioned by the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs to produce the story of George and Maude Tongerie. Anne asked a too delicate question and George set her straight, quoting an elder — an old blackfella, George called him. The old man had said: 'If you can not understand my silences, how are you ever going to understand my words?' How, I wonder, can I draw attention to the significance of the gap in Clem's story? How will readers know there is a gap? How will readers know this is a silence they must respect?

It soon became apparent to me that I did not know enough about Point Pearce, or Point Pearce people. When I began to collect some information — especially from State Records — I found myself with a completely different problem. Although he has worked near or in Port Adelaide for over twenty years, Clem's life still centres around Point Pearce and Port Victoria, South of the Mission,
where he keeps his boat. His memories of Point Pearce and York Peninsula are happy memories. His father was alive. His mother looked after him. There was a large extended family. Clem knew everyone. He was happy to grow up and become a man, earn some money, help his mother out, and the rest of the family. He was proud to be employed and respected as a good worker. He was a good shearer and fruit picker. He worked on the Morgan-Whyalla pipeline. The spiders were horrible.

Researching historical and state records relating to Point Pearce and Point Pearce people I fail to understand why Clem’s memories are so benign. I call myself a postcolonialist. I find myself wanting to impose my own outrage on this story of Point Pearce. I can’t do that! Can I?

Point Pearce was established in 1868 on 600 acres of ‘almost uncultivable land’ (Archibald 11). A mission station and school were immediately established there. In 1868, there were seventy Aborigines at the mission. Within six years there were only twenty-eight. Nevertheless, the Reverend Wilhelm Kuhn, a Moravian missionary, was determined to establish a well-ordered Aboriginal village. People were sent to Point Pearce from near and far. More land was added and the holding increased to 20,000 acres. Work on the farm — caring for sheep and other livestock, shearing, clearing the land, cultivating the poor soil — was carried out by those who lived there. Wages determined by the Trustees of the mission were paid and inmates were charged for all goods and services, agistment and rent. Cottages were built and maintained by those who lived there. Life on Point Pearce was regulated by a bell and strictly supervised. This was resented by some:

We were ruled over by our white ‘superiors’ in the form of superintendents, then we had farm overseers, mechanical overseers, and there was no privacy whatsoever. They had full control of all the Aboriginal lives in those particular institutions. It was incredible, it was an incredible feeling, to be living in a place where your lives weren’t your own because these white people really did have power over you. (in Wanganeen, 38)

Clem says nothing like this. He remembers the good times. He is very proud of his earnings. He remembers his wages from year to year.

Clem was only twelve when his family was served limited exemption papers. Clem’s father died three years after his unconditional exemption. In State Records I find evidence of Alfred O’Loughlin’s financial difficulty, following his departure from the Mission. In 1943 (at this stage a partially exempted Aborigine) Clem’s father writes to the Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Board in careful copperplate:

Dear Sir,

I have after a deep consideration for my childrens future welfare paid a deposit of £12-0-0 on a 7 room house including Bath valued at £45-0-0 Situated at Moonta Mines My intention is to make this place my permanent home. Thereby giving my children the Opportunity to become useful and honorable citizens of the useful community. (O’Loughlin 1943)
He asks for a loan. He asks for bags of lime, sand, cement, paint, linseed oil and turps. He is granted the materials for renovating the house and one month’s rations for himself and his family while he repairs the house. He must make other arrangements about paying the mortgage.

In the year following her husband’s death, Clem’s mother writes to the Board requesting some assistance with further repairs to the house. She is refused.

I think you will understand that the funds provided by Parliament for expenditure by this Department can be used only in connection with Aborigines. As you are an exempted person it would amount to improper use of Public Funds if any such work was carried out and paid for by this Department. (Aborigines Protection Board)

My photocopying piles up. A different kind of story is emerging from the records: I find evidence of ill-health, disease, prejudice, racism, violence, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted disease. Am I trying too hard? Clem does tell me about infant mortality. His mother lost twin baby girls with dysentery and a nine-year-old son to pneumonia. He will tell me later about the effects of alcohol on Point Pearce people. He tells me about the bell on Point Pearce, but does not seem resentful, as others were, about how ‘that bloody bell’ regulated his life. He does not tell me about the time the dentist came through Point Pearce and ripped out 135 aching teeth in a single day. Five of those teeth were Clem’s. Surely he would not forget that?

Clem’s great-grandfather was an Irish town planner. He surveyed Ceduna, on the edge of the Nullarbor. Clem’s father, Alfred, came from Koonibba, west of Ceduna. Although he identifies so strongly with his father, Clem describes himself as an elder from the Narrunga people of York Peninsula. Clem has no language, other than English. Clem remembers his father speaking, he says, Pitjatjandjara. This seems odd to me. I do not know enough about language distribution to understand how this was possible. Anyway, when Clem’s uncle visited Alf at their Point Pearce home, Clem heard Aboriginal language, late at night, inside the house. Clem remembers how happy that made his father — for days afterwards.

In the booklet researched in 1987 by the Narrunga Community College, Eileen Wanganeen suggests that the Point Pearce people ‘were unable to identify with the mission’ (Wanganeen). Although Point Pearce Mission certainly gathered in local Narrunga people, it also accommodated people from the Murray region and displaced, institutionalised people from Poonindie, near Port Lincoln, and Koonibba. By the early 1990s, as Christobel Mattingly points out, ‘the generations growing up on Point Pearce had no first hand knowledge of traditional culture’ (198). By the time exemptions were being served, the issue of Aboriginal identity was exceptionally complex. People on Point Pearce were a community. They took their sense of identity from each other and the place they lived in. To be declared exempt from an identity so recently reconstructed was a strange reward. People like Clem are still remaking themselves. His book will be an important
sign in this process. In all likelihood, Clem will not read it again. Why should he? He knows his own history.

A publisher I know said: ‘Sure! I want to publish Aboriginal stuff. But it has to be interesting’. What is ‘interesting’? Clem’s life is fascinating to me. How do I make Clem’s book attractive to people who will judge it against My Place and Don’t Take Your Love to Town? I can not alter the facts, but I could ‘package’ them in various ways, without losing Clem’s voice. Would this be a capitulation? Is capitulation worse than not seeing the book published?

Let us face it, I want to play with the structure of the book. Books are my business. I want Clem’s narrative to have an impact. I know that all texts are fabrications. But I also know that what Clem tells me is not a fiction. It is his history.

I wish I could produce the gender balanced book: Clem’s story and Cecilia’s story — side by side, but separate. This is not likely to happen.

I have thought about Clem’s story in relation to Aboriginal masculinities. Clem is most effusive and articulate when he talks about his relationship with his father, his history of work, fishing and football. I have access to other manuscripts written or dictated by Aboriginal men. They are not publishable as individual books, but certain chapters present ‘interesting’ and varied insights into what it means to be an Aboriginal man in contemporary times. Morris lost his memory in a car accident and is reconstructing his life as an Aboriginal man in urban Adelaide. Marty was abandoned by his wife and raised his children on his own, even though he thought that was woman’s business. Gordon remembers his grandfather practising traditional medicine. Jared finished a university degree and has written a play that has been performed in South Africa. Chapters from Clem’s story would be eminently publishable in such a collection. Clem and I have talked about this. Clem asked ‘What is an anthology?’ I would be worried that such an anthology would create an artificial kinship between its covers. For some of the contributors, this might be a problem. And who would we leave out?

I am still playing with the idea of the two-version history: Clem’s positive version of his personal history, and the often contradictory records. I think both versions are essential and need to stand side by side. I see something of a model in Jack Davis’s No Sugar. This was a collaborative play, but also, in a sense, the story of each of the Aboriginal actors and any Aboriginal person who lived at Moore River Settlement, or any place like it. Davis, working with Andrew Ross, managed to address two audiences, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, without alienating polemics. He let the hypocrisies and untruths of official history reveal themselves, in contrast with lived lives. A similar strategy is used in the recently produced play Stolen (reviewed Wark) in which a filing cabinet sits squarely in the centre of the stage, containing administrative versions of lives around which real lives revolve. Clem’s narrative could be woven around fragments of the records that relate to his life — or perhaps he might respond directly to the records. There
are many documents that Clem has yet to see. This is what we are about to do: look at the records together. It will not be easy.

A double narrative or parallel versions of history will highlight the contradictions that characterise the lives of people like Clem, who lives in two worlds. As Boori (Monty) Prior says in *Maybe Tomorrow*:

It is hard for white people to see that we live in two worlds .... Our bodies are living the way they want us to live but our hearts and souls still stay the old way. (29)

If Clem’s book can convey that contradiction, it will go a long way towards helping people like me appreciate what it means for him and those like him to maintain Aboriginal identity when the dominant culture still tends to think in terms of ‘who is a real Aborigine and who isn’t’ (Prior 29). Clem’s life has been a process of recreating what was taken away: Point Pearce and Tauondi Aboriginal Community College are his communities. Point Pearce people are his family. The land around Point Pearce is his place. His book could be a site where the wider community might meet Clem’s twenty five grandchildren: all of us, waiting to read it.

NOTES

1 Exemption was one of the legislative provisions under Section 11a of the ‘Aborigines’ Act Amendment Act 1939. This legislation exempted from the provisions of the ‘Aborigines’ Act those Aboriginal people deemed capable of living in the general community without supervision. Declarations of exemption could be made by the ‘Aborigines Protection’ Board even if the people concerned had not applied. Exemption could be unconditional, after a three year probation period, or limited. Exemption could be used as a punitive measure and was generally regarded by Aboriginal people as offensive. Exempted people were deemed honorary whites and allowed to drink in hotels (provided they showed their papers). They were not permitted to live with non-exempted Aboriginal people or visit relatives on reserves without special permission. Aboriginal people referred to these papers as ‘dog tags’.

For further information see Mattingly, *Survival in Our Own Land*, 46–53.

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Anyway, I was born in Wallaroo in 1934. Those years, on Point Pearce, for some reason they didn’t take the women into Maitland Hospital to have their baby. They had to go to Wallaroo, being a government hospital, I suppose. I was born there in 1934 and brought up on Point Pearce. I remember going to school at Point Pearce. You had to do lower one, I think that started at age five, and then grade one. I was pretty bright, too. They used to bring the bigger kids into my class and give me sums. I’d add up sums for the bigger girls, who were a grade above me, or two grades. I used to work them out real quick though. They couldn’t get over it.

I remember going to school on Wardang Island. That must have been in the late thirties. BHP ran half of the Island, the northern half, and Dad was sort of the overseer or leading hand on the bottom half of Wardang, you know? They had sheep there, about four thousand sheep, about four thousand. They used to shear them over at Wardang shearing shed. It’s all knocked down now. All the Nunga villages. Nunga. When I say Nunga, I mean Aboriginal from Point Pearce.

Point Pearce had an old boat called the Narrunga, with no mast. They used to sail it before, you know. We were towed over to Wardang by launch. We put all our gear on to take over. We had a horse and cow, and all our stuff. We loaded it up at the jetty, on the Point, at Point Pearce. Horse walked on, but the cow wouldn’t. We went over to Wardang, and the horse wouldn’t get off, cow would not get off.

I was just a child. Yes. But I remember it too. Well that was Dad’s job there. Ours was going to school. And on weekends we used to go rabbiting. Rabbits were lousy. No guns, just waddies, you know, on Point Pearce. We used to get so much a scalp — a penny, I think. We used to take the rabbit carcases back to the piggery where they cooked them up for the pigs.

When I say we, most times it’s me and Dad. I liked to be with him everywhere he went, in the school holidays. Rabbit trapping. After school. I remember on Wardang Island one time during the war they were offering a pound a dozen for the skins. They’d just throw the carcase away and keep the rabbit skins. Dad got seventy-five dozen the first week. That’s seventy-five pounds. That’s a lot of money in the early forties. And all the others were getting sixty and seventy dozen too.

I remember we had this old teacher, at Point Pearce, Mr Grewar his name was. He had a real soft spot for the kids. He used to blow one whistle to warn us
that it was time to go in, then another. We’d be playing marbles. He’d say, ‘Did you boys hear the whistle?’

‘Yeah Mr Grewar. Hang on, just gotta get my doogs back.’ Then he’d want a shot. He’d have a go too.

Old grandfather, Jack Stuart, Mum’s dad, used to work on the windmills down at the willows, down by the beach at Point Pearce. Only source of water they had, you know. Dug down among the rushes — beautiful clean water there. Old grandfather used to pump that water up to Point Pearce by windmill. He used to go past the school, going down to work, and on the way back he used to come past the school again. Mr Grewar used to say ‘Dinnertime kids’. Every time grandfather went past it was a minute to twelve. We didn’t need a clock.

Over that time, forty-one years, when he worked on the windmills, grandfather Stuart had three horses. I remember the last one, the white one, was called Jimmy Jacka. So each horse lasted over twelve or thirteen years. Grandfather also had a mate working with him for many years. His name was Tom Goldsmith.

Mum had brothers and sisters on Point Pearce. She had a brother and sister from Grandfather Stuart’s first marriage called John and Hilda. I’ve still got a photograph. Grandfather married Mum’s mother. Anyway, he worked hard and when his first wife died he married Mum’s mum, Granny Rachel Disher.

Dad’s father, from the west coast, was one of the town planners at Ceduna. That’s where O’Loughlin Terrace came from. I think my brother Danny tried to get some information from the Town Council, but they wouldn’t tell him too much. I don’t know why.

Edward O’Loughlin was my great grandfather. He came out from Ireland. He was a share farmer. He married a full-blood woman from Ooldea, Eva Pompey, Wirangu tribe. She already had a child, Rosie Coleman, born at Bookabie in 1890. Edward was Eva’s first de facto husband. Eva and Edward had two children, Alfred, born in 1893 at Denial Bay and Molly Alma, born in 1904. Alf was reared by his white father. Only Alf and Molly were known to be called O’Loughlin. Eva Mary later married a full-blood, Pompey. Their first child was Maude, born in 1900. Then Eva went back to Edward and Molly, Edward’s daughter, was born in 1904. In 1905 Eva was with Pompey and they had Emma, at Koonibba, then Edmond Herbert in 1907, Martin Augusta in 1910 and Esther in 1914. I don’t know much about their history. Dad never spoke of it much. I knew Dad had a sister over in Port Lincoln: Auntie Molly, married Uncle Edmond Bilney. When Dad died on the 12th of December, 1952, they all came over for the funeral. They never saw him for years. His sister Molly, you know, was only eighteen when she married and he was fifty-nine when he died. All that time they never saw each other.

My dad married twice too, on Point Pearce. He married Daisy Milera first. He had two kids from his first wife. The eldest was brother Edmond. The second child was a girl, Irene, who died just before she turned five.
We had a big family: fourteen, fifteen. Big family. A lot of them died young. There were twin girls. I remember Dad putting them in little boxes in the back of this old A-Model Ford to take them to hospital. But they died — together. I don’t know where their graves are: in the West Terrace Cemetery, I think. Their names were Eilene and Alene.

We did all right on Point Pearce. Dad was sort of a handy man. He’d have a go at anything. I remember that during the war he had a free light. He cut a big propeller out of a piece of timber and put a generator on it. It was the first one on Point Pearce. He used to charge car batteries for people on Point Pearce.

On Point Pearce we had a six-roomed house. A big stone house, good house, one of the better ones. There were a lot of good homes there, built of stones from around the beach, and sand. Some of them were built without cement in those days — just mortar and stones. We had a free light that Dad made. I told you about that. And I told you about the twins, the sisters who died. And I remember breaking my leg, there, 'cause me and my sisters were playing in the bedroom. I was under the bed, on my back, pushing a spring up in the mattress, showing off. My sister was right up on top of the bedhead. She jumped off, right on top of me. I said, 'Aw my leg is broken'. It was too. I got it in plaster. They took me out to Ardrossan, to the doctor. A week after that I was hopping around on it. I wasn’t supposed to. Every time mum or dad came around I’d get down.

I remember doing drill at school. The war was on then. They dug big trenches outside the school, for drills, just in case the bombs started to fall. Mr Grewar would blow the whistle and we’d all run and put our hands over our heads and go in the trenches, three-foot trenches. 'Cause there were planes flying all over the place there. At one stage they thought they were going to build the airstrip there, at Point Pearce — all that flat swamp land. But it never happened.

We had big trucks come in there, two or three big trucks, and just pick the men up. Whether they said yes or no they just herded them up and took them. I remember the old ladies there, crying for their sons. They were taking them away. Most of them only went to Springton or Mataranka, places like that. And Darwin. A lot of Aboriginal people were taken from Point Pearce during the War. Half-a-dozen never came back but most of them did, yeah, which was good. Lot of them went to the Pacific Islands and fought in the jungle and the Middle East. Some of those people lived in Hollywood — that’s what we called the shacks outside Point Pearce. Three of the Smith brothers went. One never came back. Good fishing family — Smiths, from Moonta. He was a white man. He married a Nunga woman, Granny Alley.

During the war, in the school at Point Pearce, the bells would ring. When the whistle blew we had to run outside and do the drill, in case a bomb came. Oh it was scary. Then a fire started up north of us. I was scared of fires. I remember once I was standing behind Mum. She got up to light the metho burner — you know the little ones? I was standing behind her and looked around and when she
lit it it blew up and burnt all the hair off my face. She put it out with her apron. Since then I’ve been frightened of, well, thunder and fires, lightning and everything. Anyway this fire started north of Point Pearce. It was coming over the hill, straight for Point Pearce, you know. The old workman there, he was doing something on the school wall. He called out, ‘Oh here comes the devil’. He was making it worse, and we were all crying. Anyway, I was happy when that night the fire went past Point Pearce. All these cars were out in the paddock dragging bags over the flames. Gawd I was scared when the fire was coming.

In our house we had three bedrooms. We had a wireless. Maybe at one stage we was the only family with a wireless. ‘Cause everybody used to come and listen to the news — quarter-to-six news — and Mrs Hobbs and Dad and Dave, you know? They used to come and listen to the serials. ‘Cause Dad had this big, what do you call it, big wireless, old one, with a dry battery and a wet battery. We used a car battery sometimes. We used to buy the dry batteries. And of course we had the free electric light — one in the kitchen run off the free light that Dad made up.

People would sit down by the table. Dad’s half brother used to come down at night-time. He was a sort of a jack of all trades too. He’d come from Koonibba, same place as Dad. He used to come down at night, and sit down and yarn. He used to be great with leatherwork and he’d sew shoes, with a needle and twine. I remember sitting alongside him and when he’d pull the needle he’d hit me in the eye. Good job the needle wasn’t pointing that way! His name was Uncle Albert Webb.

Mum had a child before she met Dad. His name was Ossie. He lived with us. Him and Locky were the two eldest ones. Locky used to walk in his sleep a lot. Locky used to get up and pick Jack up, in his sleep. Jack’s my brother, older than me. Locky would walk up the street with him. Dad used to sing out ‘Jack, Locky’s taking you away, he’s walking in his sleep’. Jack had to jump out of Locky’s arms.

They had pictures Friday night. We all went to the pictures. A bloke from Minlaton, Mr Porter, come out. He had a big generator in the shed, you know, four cylinder engine, car engine, T-Model Ford. He ran this motor to show pictures. We used to go to the pictures. Coming out of the pictures one night, we met Locky half way. That’s the one that walked in his sleep. He was walking up the street and we were coming home. He only had his shorty pyjamas on. We were told you couldn’t touch anybody when they’re walking in their sleep. You’re supposed to talk or whisper to them. Anyway, he woke up with a jolt and he went back home. After a while he quietened down. He was the one who got married and took the grog back to Point Pearce to get rid of his exemption.

Mum was a housewife on Point Pearce, like many others. Dad was a shearer. I had another brother too, Teddy. He died when he was nine years of age. Pneumonia or something. Dad was shearing in the shearing shed on the bottom of
Point Pearce. He told Mum if anything happened there: 'Walk out on the middle of the road. I'll be keeping watch for you'. Teddy was very sick, and Mum came out on the road. Dad saw and dropped everything and went to see. I think Teddy died that day. He used to change tyres and all, on the old A-Model Ford, you know. Nine, ten year old he was, nine I think. Helping dad with everything.

Mum had a sister on Point Pearce — Phyllis, Phoebe. You know Auntie Pheobe Wanganeen? She was the youngest. She's the only one left now. Mum's mother and father, Granny Rachel and her husband Jack, lived in the house where we got the water from. Remember I was telling you about that?

Mum looked after us real well. She had a bottle of Epsom Salts on the shelf. We used to have a spoonful every morning. It was a terrible taste of course. Oh we had castor oil too, though. That was wicked that was. She always had a hot cup of tea waiting for us. We'd have the tea and we wouldn't notice. Plenty sugar, yeah, to get rid of the taste.

Mum used to take us out, down the beach. The women on Point Pearce was a great mob for mulleting off the shore. You'd see them lined up along the beach, you know, throwing lines out. They'd have a bag, old sugar bag, cut in half, with a string around, to put their fish in. They'd have a little can on the side, with their worms in. They'd go down the creek, along the shore, where there's seaweed, and get all the worms. They'd go early in the morning. By the time they'd get the worms, the tide would be coming in. They used to go in horse-and-carts, old cars, just for a feed of mullet, yeah. They'd catch them with handlines: big sinker and a couple of hooks. That's all.

The women fished for years. They're still doing it today — only one or two of them but, yeah, still doing it. That's where I drove the first time. I sat on Mum's lap. I was about eight or nine I think. It was an A-Model Ford. I steered it for her, sitting on her lap, yeah. It was the first time. Over the tussocks, bushes and reeds and things, you know. Rough road.

We used to have geese there on Point Pearce. Well, not us. Our neighbour used to. Her name was Granny Sarah. We used to get up early in the morning — go and take the eggs from round the side of the shed. We only took one or two.

On Point Pearce the old people used to eat swans, especially the old people from Point Macleay. They lived on them. They used to eat the swan eggs too. They're protected now, but years ago, they used to eat them. One of those swan eggs, or half, is all you need for breakfast. I never tasted them, but people there told me. And the Point MacLeay people caught pelican for feathers to make flowers. Course Point Pearce people don't touch them. Not the pelicans. One or two eat swans there, but it's only the people who moved from Point Macleay. Point Pearce people never used to eat swans. I always thought swans never had enough meat on them. They look big, but when you cook them up, there's nothing. A little layer of meat and that's it. You get a better feed out of a wombat or something.
EARLY WORKING DAYS

My dream was to go rabbit trapping. Every weekend I wanted to be with Dad. He used to go out during the week — every day during the week — used to camp out. He'd be at Alford near Kadina, maybe Port Clinton. He used to trap along the coast from Port Broughton, right down to Brentwood.

Lots of people did that. They all had their own areas. There'd be a camp there, another one over there. But they'd set their traps in different directions. Rabbit buyers used to come from Adelaide, every morning. They'd cross to Moonta, go down the coast, picking up rabbits. They'd have a truckload by the time they got back to Adelaide. Rabbit was what we ate most times, especially during the War. There was rations, but always plenty of rabbits. Money was short, you know. Mum cooked stew. We had roast and curry. Lot of curried rabbits.

When Dad set traps closer to home, he just put the rabbits in a bag, an ordinary wheat bag, and sent them to Adelaide. You could put twenty-one pairs of rabbits in a bag, and then you'd sew up the bag. After a week or so we would secure a cheque in the mail from the Rabbit Buyer.

I remember old Mr Alec McLeay from McLeay's Farm at Clinton Centre. He reminded me of Colonel Sanders, looking down, with his walking stick, looking at the bags. 'Don't forget now, three bushels to the bag.' He was tight. Didn't want to spend a penny. It was his brother who started McLeay's Carpets, I was told.

So that's what I done during the holidays. I was the only one of the kids who went with Dad. The others were younger than me.

We shore sheep too at times, you know. I did my first crutching during the holidays. I must have been twelve — nearly ready to leave school. I left halfway through grade six in 1948, when I thought I was a man. I wanted to go rabbiting. Trapping rabbits: skin them, clean them. Sell them. That's all we done.

Sometimes we brought rabbits to Adelaide in the car. We went to the pictures, to the Bugs. Is that what they called it? They called it the Bug Theatre. I saw lots of Westerns. I liked the serial. Yeah. I enjoyed it in there.

I was so much involved in rabbit trapping. I went everywhere. Beltana. Moonta. I spent my money on the pictures — going to the pictures in Moonta, buying lollies and stuff. I gave some money to Mum. I remember buying two pound of sugar for her. Jam. Tinned jam. When the War was on. Butter. Other things. Power Kerosene that we used when we couldn't get petrol.

In the time we were still going to school we got the exemptions. A lady come from Adelaide. She was Sister Mackenzie, from the Aboriginal Protection Board. She came out to Moonta to see us when we all lived there. I was standing beside Dad when she asked Dad if he wanted exemptions, you know. And Dad said, 'No, gee, we don't want exemption'. We wanted to go back to Point Pearce, you know,
to see the people. Mum’s mother and father lived there, and sisters too. Sister Mackenzie said ‘All right. That’s all we wanted to know’. She went back to Adelaide. Next thing you know we got the exemptions. We’d said no, we didn’t want them. Dad didn’t want them. But we got them anyway. I was only ten or eleven or twelve, you know.

So that was the exemption. They used to call it dog license. The only thing it was good for was going to the pub. But Dad didn’t drink. They’d give you limited exemption, then they’d give you unconditional. Expulsion was the worst thing. That was different. You weren’t allowed to go back to the reserve. For three years you weren’t allowed to go within a radius — thirty miles I think it was — of the reserve. You also weren’t allowed to go into the pub. If you did you were automatically gaol. My brother, Locky, had the limited exemption. Within three years he got a load of grog and took it back to Point Pearce. He got caught deliberately and had the exemption taken away.

I went peapicking. Then I got a job at Moonta, on a chicken farm. Yeah, there were 1500 chooks or something and I was cleaning out the coops, feeding chooks — all that. I was getting two-pound-five a week. I was about fourteen.

I always had work, until later years. Then I started bludging a little bit. I was getting two pound five plus dinner every day. ‘Cause I used to walk from Moonta Mines over to Moonta and then go back. The boss made me eat out on the verandah. He didn’t want me in the kitchen with him and his wife. I mean, I didn’t mind being on my own. I was a bit shy then anyway.

His wife brought a meal out for me and I ate it on the verandah, beside his wooden leg. He used to be in the army and he lost a leg. I used to talk to his leg. I don’t know if it was those days that he didn’t like Nungas sitting with them or what.

I didn’t have bad meals. ‘Cause at that time I was getting two-pound-five a week and my brothers were working on the pipeline between Moonta and Kadina. They were digging the trenches. That was before the Murray water ever went that way. But they was getting seven pound a fortnight. That was big money, you see. So I thought, ‘Oh, I’m not too bad, I’m getting two-pound-five a week, that’s five-pound a fortnight’. That was for shovelling chook poo and feeding the chooks and stuff. I mixed the bran and pollard up. The chooks were in cages, in a big long shed.

Course Moonta, they had a flour mill in Moonta where they made their own bran and pollard. I used to go there and pick the bran and pollard up. I worked there for a while too, in the flour mill. I was getting three-pound there. But that didn’t last long. I think it’s closed now. Yeah, I always wanted a bike, see. I couldn’t save up to get a bike to ride around so me and my cousin Buddy used to steal his brother’s bike. His brother was Sandy. He used to chase us. Buddy and me used to donkey each other. We run into a berry bush and had about nine punctures to fix after Sandy caught up with us.
Yeah, after that work, that second year, I went back to Tasman Hobart. That was the name of the man who owned the block where I picked peas before. I worked a couple of weeks. Course I was on my own then. Mum and Dad wasn’t there. I was about fifteen I suppose. And there were other men there working with us. I left before the picking finished and went on to Port Augusta. My sister was there living on Stokes Terrace with the Stewart family. Course our grandfather’s name was Stuart too, but he was a different Stuart. S-t-e-w I think that was, a-r-t. And my sister worked there. Next door to the Stewarts was Mrs Starkey, married a white man. He had a brother in Wilmington, just through Horrocks Pass. It was a dairy farm. He got me a job there.

Oh it was that cold, getting up at four o’clock in the morning in winter. He had milking machines, which was good. I mean, I didn’t have to milk them by hand. But talk about cold. He bought me a pair of boots. When I first started off I had no boogies, that’s what we called boots. Only stopped there for a week or two and I took off. I didn’t like it. So one morning I got up and walked away without telling him. I was going back to Port Augusta. I’d started to fret for home, and all that, you know. So I walked from there nearly into Port Augusta. I went through Horrocks Pass. Saw a car coming and walked up into the hills and walked along the hills path. It was getting on, the sun was going down behind the hills. I was getting a bit scared on my own. These cars were going past. Then I laid right alongside the road with my little case. This old Chev came — 1928, 29 model — with this old couple in it. They give me a ride to Port Augusta, just on sundown. Oh I was glad, too. Didn’t want to camp out on the road by myself.

I went back to Mrs Stewart’s there. I slept in their house and I got up early. They didn’t know I was there. I sneaked in after dark. Early in the morning I got up and took off. ‘Cause I was scared they’d say something about me running away from work, or leaving work without telling anybody. That was when my sister saw me, anyway. I went back to Moonta. When I got back she started telling dad. ‘This fella has left his work up there.’ I didn’t like it, see.

My dad never said nothing. He was just — easy-going, you know. ‘Cause since I left school I worked all the time. I never had any time, you know, except when we couldn’t get work.

In Barmera I worked for Harold Anthony. And then the next year I worked for Don Bonner. Lot of whitefellas up there too. I had a job with three or four other boys. No women in the gang at all. We used to cook for ourselves. So I got a job as a day pay worker, hot-dipping the fruit and spreading it on racks. All those that were on piece work got so much a bucket, so much a hundred buckets. I think it was twenty seven bob a hundred for sultana grapes. They was fairly big buckets, took a lot to fill them. But currants, you pick them first before you pick any grapes. We used to cut them first. We only had little small bunches — they were only little small grapes. Five-pound a hundred for those — a hundred buckets. If
you’d pick three hundred buckets a day you’d be lucky. On piece work you could pick an extra thirty buckets before eight-o’clock and other thirty after five.

Because I was on day pay I used to get up early in the morning and go and pick nearly a hundred buckets, or close to a hundred, before eight o’clock. Then I’d go back again with the tractor, see. The other blokes would be just starting at eight to pick. They gotta pick for their piece work. So they’d work all day, spreading grapes and dipping them — hot dipping them in Emu’s oil or whatever they used to dip it in: boiling point for the Gordos, cold water dip for the sultanas. You had to get the hot dip up to boiling point for those Gordos. I think it’s healthy, to protect the skin from cracking, you know, the raisins.

Well I’d do all that, and after five-o’clock, when everyone knocked off, I stayed behind and picked another fifty or sixty buckets, ’cause I used to need to have money on the weekend. When it rained the piece workers didn’t get paid, see. But I did, because I was on day pay. Don used to wake me up when a bit of rain come. We had the grapes spread out on the ground on sisal stuff, you know — hessian. I’m the only one he could call, ’cause I was on day pay, and I’d get up and do a couple of buckets. The others didn’t have to go, the piece workers. Anyway, I used to do it because he was such a good boss.
STAINS

Red rain out of the earth
While I sit in a Land Rights meeting
It marks my shiny car
With the broken dreams
Of the Mallee’s soldier settlers —

Or does it blow, this dust,
From somewhere further back
Living in English seemed natural as breathing
even when schooled to languages
where breath
    must move in different ways
to pass the necessary impedimenta
transforming it to speech.
    (How safe the Latinate abstraction
    Anglo-Saxon tongue,
teeth, lips — any of these
might conjure up the phantom of your body
that merely tolerates such names).

Eighteen years it took
to recognise the English poetry I loved
was an imperfect medium
for the natural air I breathed;
years more of labouring
towards reconciliation.

Knowing this, how could I dream so stubbornly,
so long, there’d be no reckoning,
no day
    when breath that mingled —
    wild or quiet —
    so sweetly in the dark
would summon lovers back
to the waking glare
of separate languages;
when what had joined us together would put asunder.
Much work has been attempted to forge identities beyond the dominant topographies of the political divisions within Northern Ireland; divisions which are expressed most visibly in the so-called ‘peace line’, a fortified wall that separates communities in West Belfast. The dominant ideologies within the state of Northern Ireland, Britain and internationally, seek to emphasise commonality between communities as a means of diverting attention from the gulfs between them that have been and remain unresolved politically and structurally. In the face of such strategies, the staging of a play in 1997 devised within a Republican community in West Belfast might appear to be a perverse assertion of difference at grass-roots level. *Binlids* was a community play that explicitly attempted to replace dominant images imposed from without on that community with ones recognized as authentic within it. Lambasted by critics, politicians and state representatives, it was *fêted* within its own immediate community, thereby articulating the discrepancies between the different forces of social identity construction at work in Northern Ireland and other contested contexts.

**POSITIONING**

As a native of Belfast with the characteristic twang of the city’s accent, whenever I speak other English-speaking people from outside Northern Ireland almost instantly form an impression of who I am. This assumed identity is created from an association of the image they have of someone with my accent, the images they have of Northern Ireland and my apparent affiliations, often couched in a choice between either of the two sides they ‘know’ to be engaged in the conflict: Catholic/Nationalist/Republican versus Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. It is arguable that the conflation of these terms is itself part of the problem, forming neat binary oppositions that disguise the complexity of the situation and how it is experienced. Fortunately for me, as an educated, middle-class university lecturer, it is relatively easy to redress the imbalances and injustices of the first impression, since one of the privileges I enjoy is the right to articulate freely my sense of self. This essay makes use of that privilege to discuss a theatrical production through which the
nationalist community of West Belfast dared to seize a public space in which to articulate a sense of their own identity for themselves. West Belfast is set apart from the rest of the city and the rest of Northern Ireland by a range of factors. These factors include the dominant images and processes of image making about Northern Ireland both within the media and in urban planning and promotion. This essay examines the ways in which the production responded to these dominant forms and processes in asserting the authenticity of its account, and finally, it examines how the play might actually be considered as part of a process towards peace, despite running contrary to many of the official strategies to resolve the conflict.

**WEST BELFAST — A PLACE APART**

As Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto notes, 'Primarily, the politics of place refers to the practices in which the images and sense of place is produced and reproduced. In place politics, identity, politics and place come together .... Power, especially hegemonic power, defines the content and boundaries of action and practices of politics of place' (Online). Nationalist West Belfast is one place in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power contend to renegotiate the boundaries of action. As a place it is defined and set apart by factors which are both natural and planned; socio-economic; cultural; and ultimately, political. Its positioning is articulated through physical boundaries: at its back to the west is Black Mountain; to the north the peace-line separating it from the Shankhill and other Loyalist areas; to the east the M1 motorway; and to the south the town of Lisburn and its green belt exclusion area. Some socio-economic characteristics of the area are that, in some wards nearly half the economically active workforce are unemployed; in Whiterock, 84 per cent of households are without a car; in Whiterock, Twinbrook and Upper Springfield wards between 11 and 13 per cent of households experience overcrowding; 95 per cent of houses in the Falls ward are not owned by the occupants; 5 out of the 10 most deprived wards in the city are concentrated in West Belfast (Murtagh 191).

The political separation of West Belfast lies in its nationalist constituency and the relationship between this and the states of Northern Ireland and Britain (Darby). This separation was made manifest in the concentration of hostile British military forces in the area from 1969. A complete investigation of the dynamics of separation or segregation (Boal) because of this distinctive constituency is not the scope of this essay. It is clear, however, that since 'boundaries are *relational* rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community *in relation to other communities*’ (Cohen 58), many of the boundaries of nationalist West Belfast have marked it out at a disadvantage to other communities. Thus, while Catholics and Nationalists in Northern Ireland in general have been structurally disadvantaged (Ruane and Todd; Darby) within a state that has favoured the privileges of Protestants historically, those within West Belfast are among those
who have endured the greatest levels of disadvantage. I want now to examine the specific ways in which West Belfast has been further disadvantaged by the discourses which exercise hegemony over the representation of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

**IMAGE AND IDENTITY — DOMINANT MODES**

Representation of the conflict both within factual reporting and fictional representation has tended to partially represent or otherwise distort all forms of republicanism, a broad movement associated with violent struggle for a united Ireland. Militant republicans who support or engage in physical violence have been represented as ‘psychopathic, and their actions as incomprehensible’ (Edge 223), often reiterating an historically pervasive vision of the savage Irish. Alongside this, republicans have been silenced by their omission from the media, literally through the restrictions on the reporting of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, instituted in October 1988. The silencing of republicans has also been the result of more tacit censorship from at least the start of the most recent phase of the conflict (Moloney). As Lance Pettit’s survey of representations of the conflict in television drama demonstrates: ‘Little drama exists to explain how and why many “ordinary” people would join or support — even passively — paramilitary organisations involved in killings and punishment beatings’ (Online). The point is extended by Cornell:

[The] depiction of republicans as either criminal, psychopathic, or politically naïve has defined the wider nationalist community with which republicanism is frequently equated in these narratives, as well as others who explicitly identify themselves as Irish .... [D]rama has rarely proven more open to ‘alternative’ readings of events and issues, and on the subject of Northern Ireland it has maintained an antagonism toward ‘oppositional’ views. (198)

One of course has to acknowledge that a vibrant counter-culture has sprung into existence to fill the absences created by the dominant British media. As Dowler notes:

Group identity is reinforced through exclusive rituals which reincarnated resonant events and symbolic places from the past. Public demonstrations, political murals, anti-British graffiti and songs of resistance not only celebrate this community’s territorial bondaries, but also seem to inscribe into the landscape a homogenous discourse of resistance. (169)

To her list might be added the Irish language movements (although the relationship between official Irish language movements and republicanism are not straightforward (Rolston); newspapers engaged in counter-information such as *Republican News/An Phoblacht* and *The Andersonstown News*; and Gaelic Games (although again the relationship between the Gaelic Athletic Association and militant republicanism is not straightforward). As Lionel Pilkington argues, the
institutional theatres throughout Ireland ‘tend on the whole to portray the culture of republicanism as sentimental, sectarian, and crudely propagandistic’ (138), though he charts some earlier examples of republican theatrical interventions. He cites Lloyd’s assertion that ‘To the monopoly of violence claimed by the state corresponds the monopoly of representation claimed by the dominant culture’ (Lloyd qtd in Pilkington 134). For my own part having been brought up in a nationalist enclave in the north of Belfast, before attending university in Scotland and working in England, I found myself aligned with such negative views of militant republicanism.

The negative effects of the mis- and under-representation of republicanism within the media in general, have been exacerbated further by specific strategies to do with image making as a means of economic renewal. Attempts at rebuilding the economic infrastructure of Northern Ireland as a whole and Belfast in particular have ‘focused on expansion of the retail economy of the city, and latterly public pump primed office developments’ (Neill 67) through the creation of the appearance of a politically neutral Belfast city centre. The use of public-private partnerships has regenerated the central area by creating a sense of a more ‘normal’ context in which people can work and socialise. According to Neill, this normalisation has meant the development of a post-modern aesthetic in which a bland present replaces historical buildings and their connections with the past. The result is a wilful historical amnesia and selective representation of the present.

As he states:

The key symbols of the new [City Centre Local Plan] plan for Belfast were normality, neutrality and consent .... In the plan Belfast city centre was harnessed as a symbol for a normal Northern Ireland .... The new city centre shops are marshalled like icons to oppose the array of images painted on the gable walls of housing areas in the city, which portray divisive symbols of the past. (Neill 58)

The inadequacies of this policy in the face of the political realities are made even clearer since:

It is arguable that ... the main beneficiaries of Belfast’s reimagining have been a relatively prosperous middle class [and] the inability of this strategy to deliver the qualitative change in the unemployment situation in West Belfast ... puts a serious class impediment on the possibility of mobilising consent behind a policy of planning for neutrality. (Neill 66)

The people of West Belfast are twice excluded therefore from the reimagining of Belfast: the political conflict in and through which they are situated either actively or merely because of where they live is deliberately ignored; and the economic plight of the mainly working class population has been subjugated to the interests of the middle classes as a strategy of economic renewal.
BINLIDS — THE BACKGROUND, PROCESS AND PRODUCTION

In the face of these strategies of image-making about the conflict in general and Belfast in particular, it is hardly surprising, then, that the excluded and silenced would eventually try to take control of their own image. The first substantial response was the inauguration of a West Belfast Community Festival, Féile an Phobail, in 1987. According to Festival Director, Catríona Ruane:

Féile an Phobail began as the direct response of the West Belfast community to the neglect and discrimination which the area suffered in terms of facilities and resources .... The dual purpose of Féile was to create from within West Belfast the resources and facilities which had been withheld from it and to take control of its own imagemaking — to create a showcase of creativity, talent and energy. (Online)

Part of the resources which Féile an Phobail made available were dramatic, firstly by hosting productions by local professional companies. In 1995, collaboration with one of these companies, DubbelJoint Productions, led to the development of a play devised by a group of women to celebrate International Women’s Day, Just a Prisoner’s Wife. Around this a new company was formed, JustUs Community Theatre, with the vision ‘to empower our community to tell their own story, in their own words, through the medium of the dramatic arts’ (JustUs Community Theatre 2). The company was awarded the Belfast City Council Best Arts Partnership Award for the collaboration with DubbelJoint on this project.

The company’s second co-production with DubbelJoint was Binlids — A Drama of West Belfast Resistance, first staged as part of Féile and Phobail in 1997, before being revived in February 1998 and then transferring to New York in October of that year. The play was written jointly by four members of JustUs. It charts the experience of women in West Belfast through the 18 years following the introduction by the British government of internment without trial for those suspected of involvement in the paramilitary. The play’s title evokes the lids of the metal bins or trash cans banged on the ground to warn of the arrival of British forces in an area. It is chronological in its structure, marking out critical incidents in the evolution of the community, pieced together with song and narration. In one key incident, excerpts from British and Irish newspapers condemning the barbarism of the community are read out, with the local women chanting in chorus ‘That’s not us, that’s not us’. Like the Living Newspaper tradition in which it may be situated, the play is also stylistically diverse, combining documentary with naturalistic and expressionist treatments.

With the initiation of this second project, director Pam Brighton spent time with the core group of women talking through stories and together they worked out the main areas which they then set about researching. This research ‘involved hundreds of interviews with individuals, or relatives of individuals, who would feature in the play, as well as collating articles and speeches to be used’ (Scally 1998, 18). The play emerged from this process of research with some scenes being written beforehand and much of the second act being devised through
rehearsal. The final script included verbatim accounts, transcripts of political speeches, facts and figures, political songs from the period and choral chanting. Four professional male actors were brought in to augment the cast but the emphasis is on the experiences of women as mothers, daughters, sisters, soldiers and activists. Even with a large cast, several of the actors played more than one role. The play was mounted as a promenade performance with the audience surrounded by five stages between which the action switched. Sometimes this creates interactions between actors and spectators: implicating spectators as part of the scene, for example, when a British army snatch squad arrests a character and drags him through the audience. At other times the audience is situated as witnesses to the action: in one scene a group of British soldiers refuse to return a ball to a young boy playing football nearby, and eventually force him to say his prayers at gunpoint.

**THE CRITICAL RECEPTION: A QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY**

The emphasis on research and careful documentation points to the attempt to present a more authentic story of the conflict in West Belfast and it is around this area of authenticity that the critical reception of the play is split. A number of reviews comment on the piece as authentic: ‘The overall effect was to convince the audience that this was that era being recreated all over again’ (Ó Liathain 31); and, ‘The sound effects — of bullets and beatings — are authentic enough to bring a chill to the summer air’, (McFadden 11), for example. Actress Bridie McMahon cautioned that ‘You must remember that we are dealing with real incidents which have left a mark on individuals and on the whole community …. It’s like your life flashing in front of you because all the scenes — and there are hundreds of them — are real events’ (McMillen 24). The director Pam Brighton stated that: ‘For myself, the actors, the technicians and those of us from outside West Belfast it was a rare experience where for the most part everything one was dealing with was the truth — something that had actually happened, something that had really been said’ (Online).

By contrast, criticisms of the play contest the partiality of the production. Ben Webster’s review in the nationalist (but resolutely not republican) Belfast–based *Irish News*, suggested that ‘Given their concern over media distortion, it is strange that the authors did not give equal treatment to their depiction of republican violence’ (5). This was echoed in other reviews including those in Irish-American newspapers: ‘No matter how justified the arguments may be, it is still just a noisy primitive commercial, overemphatically making its pitch’ (Marks, Online). Even positive reviews declare, for example, that there is ‘an unashamed political bias to Binlids’ (Marlow 41). I too took the view that the play was too one-sided on my first encounter with it and argued this position strongly in a public discussion with Pam Birghton. It was only on completing the research for this essay that I began to see ways in which my own view was the response of a cultural évoluté
conditioned to seeing the circumstances of republicans as self-inflicted and their strategies of resistance as barbaric.

The tension between the experience of the play as authentic and the experience of it as partial is derived from different understandings of authenticity articulated as a relationship between reality or history and its representation. As Graham argues, 'Authenticity and claims to authenticity underlie the conceptual and cultural denial of dominance' (8). The issue is made more complex since, as Favorini points out, 'the writing of history, here instanced in docudrama, interpenetrates with the making of history, that is the political activity' (33). This was recognised by the company, as actress Niamh Flanagan stated 'We constantly have to keep proving that we’re real and that what we’re doing is authentic, and that we have a place in the scheme of things' (Hurley. Online).

There are at least three responses to the criticism of one-sidedness in the play. The first is that made by Pam Brighton in a published response to Webster’s review:

_Binlids_ is criticised for its one-sided approach, yet with all the resources at their disposal when have the media given us a play or film that whilst it attacks republicanism, carefully reminds itself about the nature and degree of its own brutalising behaviour .... _Binlids_ was not seeking a balance within itself but seeking a balance in the overall perception of what makes West Belfast tick. (Online)

Here Brighton is articulating a wariness of the concept of any impartial history. As Favorini notes, 'De Certeau (7) reminds us, thinking of Machiavelli, that the calculus of relations discovered by the historian may be used at the will of the prince. If the historian can play the role ... of virtual prince, in educating and mobilising, so too may the documentarian' (Favorini 33). A second response may be to ask whether there is such an objective place from which to view the events in Northern Ireland, given the variety of parties implicated in the situation.

A third response focuses on the desirability of such partiality. The play is not concerned with the positivist enterprise of discovering an objectively-testable match between the totality of reality and the representation; rather, it is concerned with the preservation of the sources used as a recognition of the authority of ordinary people in remembering their own lives. It is in this sense that the work is authentic: 'Authenticity here ... becomes rooted in “the people” and in the bond between the self and the group; and additionally, authenticity relies on the ability to “utilise” and culturally employ such “loyalty”' (Graham 11). One of the singers, Terence O’Neill commented that ‘A lot of effort was invested in getting the details right ... so we took the scenes out and tried them on people, to see if the way we got things was the way people remembered’ (Hurley. Online). Pam Brighton stated that ‘the play’s premise was to remember and reconstruct the events that the people involved felt had most shaped their sense of themselves and their society over the past 30 years’ (Online). The production’s authenticity is therefore a way of
validating the experiences of different individuals within the context of a community, articulating for them the right to be heard.

**PARTIALITY AS PEACE-MAKING**

This celebration of partiality is problematic for two of the main strategies used to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland. The first strategy, that of assimilation (Darby 150), has sought to emphasise or create commonality between individuals from the communities in conflict as a means of diverting attention from the differences between the groups that have yet to be or cannot be resolved politically and structurally. A second strategy of pluralism (Darby 150), has sought to equate cultural ‘traditions’ as essentially and symmetrically divided and to achieve mutual understanding and ‘parity of esteem’ for each tradition. It might therefore be seen as unhelpful within the process towards peace to emphasise the ways in which a community has suffered through its isolation and to celebrate distinctive political and cultural traditions that demand a particular rather than a balanced response.

Rolston has attacked the strategy of pluralism since ‘it proves inadequate to explain an important element in state cultural policy which derives ultimately from its differential relationship with Irish nationalism on the one hand, and Ulster unionism on the other. An adequate assessment of policy must acknowledge the history and effects of colonialism’ (272). On the basis of his argument, I contend that the play had an important role in the process of peace making for this community at the precise point of its staging in 1997. This was the moment when fresh negotiations were being initiated by Sinn Féin with the Ulster Unionists and the British government in anticipation of the declaration of a second cease-fire by the Provisional IRA. The production invoked a number of important processes for its audiences. The first of these is the opportunity to confront those events which had conditioned the community’s internalised sense of self without necessarily being acknowledged as such at the time. One of the actor’s, Máiréad Uí Adhnaill, commented that, ‘My mother came to the dress rehearsal. She said that it wasn’t that you had forgotten any of these things, but when she was living through it there was always another crisis. You went through internment because there was something else happening after that, and now all of a sudden it was back in your face’ (Scally 18). Being able to externalise these experiences is important, as Day comments in relation to Playback Theatre, ‘without the chance to speak and externalise the insights that emerge from our angle of vision, we are unable to experience our own positioning, far less to make any sort of comparison or negotiation with other people who are positioned differently’ (85).

Secondly, this re-experiencing of the past has the potential to be therapeutic, a possibility explicitly invoked in the programme for the New York production. According to Senator Tom Hayden’s ‘Preface’:
In a single phrase, *Binlids* is a catharsis of the oppressed: a theatrical outcry of raw humanity .... The residents of West Belfast, in the face of the oblivion planned for them, show all the signs of becoming a 'risen people'. Now they return to Manhattan with *Binlids*, a therapeutic re-enactment carrying a needed message from the human spirit to a jaded world. (5)

This is remarked in several of the reviews of the production which recognise both the passions employed by the actors and roused within the audience, and the possibility of catharsis as a result:

Passion and fury are the hallmarks of this production: passion because all the elements of the drama are combined in a powerful expression of real genuine feelings: the fury vented during *Binlids* seems like the inevitable unburdening of anger after a long and frustrating confinement. (Ó Liatháin 31)

Thirdly, by demonstrating the ways in which the community has evolved in response to its changing context, there is a differentiation between the past and the present. This is a way of demonstrating both that the present is not inevitable, but the result of specific historical processes, and that the present moment is not the same as the past and therefore presents an opportunity for doing things differently. By demonstrating the changes within the community and in the community's relationships with external communities, it demonstrates the possibility that the conflict is the product of specific historical circumstances which now can be changed.

**Conclusions**

*Binlids* therefore can be seen as an exercise in counter-hegemony in its image making. It resists the marginalising discourses of both the media and the planners. It recognises as authoritative the ordinary people who have been made extraordinary by the conflict in which they are situated and gives voice to their experiences. In doing so, it emphasises their separation and celebrates it as a way of putting the past in context. It contributes to the processes of peace making by enabling the community to move beyond past imperatives and to engage in new relationships with other communities. This role in the peace process is summed up in the words of Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams:

It appears to me that part of the process of creating peace includes, and needs, people reclaiming their own stories and telling their own tales. This has to be a fundamental part of any healing process. Getting others to listen then becomes the other part. The sum total of all the parts — all the stories and the understanding of the stories in their totality — is what peace and the makings of peace are all about. (7)
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(Photo: Marion Giles)
Zeny Giles

CONSPIRACY OF DELIGHT

It is something of a miracle to me that at the age of fifty, I should take up all-year-round swimming and grow addicted to the Newcastle Ocean Baths. I’ve learned to know the Baths through limpid blue and the turbulence of king tides. I’ve learned to differentiate between 19 degrees and 15 degrees and have, like my fellow regulars, become disdainful of the fickle summer crowds and secretly long for the water temperature to drop so that we, the true believers, can have the Baths back to ourselves.

This is a moody place. The southerly whistles through the sheds and chases us into the churned up pools. A milder wind makes crisp patterns in the water like a child’s drawing of waves. On calm days, the pools are smooth as pale satin and sand-coloured whiting slip through the shallows. I love the small crabs that live in the interstices, the warmth as I swim past the inlets to the ocean, the waves that break at the southern end, sloshing the pool, astonishing me with a sudden drenching.

Early each morning, Peter, the live-in caretaker, hoses down the sheds, the picnic tables, the benches and the asphalt area leading to the pools. He manages at the same time, to ensure that there isn’t a single patch of dryness where any of us can leave our clothes and towels. ‘He should put down that hose and pick up a scrubbing brush,’ says a retired sister from the Royal Newcastle Hospital who doesn’t approve of his profligate hosing or his delight in yarning with the regulars. ‘Look at the grease on the tiles behind the showers.’ She is worked up now and broadens her attack. ‘The caretaker before him used to scrub the sides of the pools every day. None of that green muck around the edges when he was here.’ And it’s true that sometimes the pungent smell of seaweed clings to our skin, but it’s hard to find fault with somebody so heartily in love with his territory. ‘Beautiful, mate! Absolutely beautiful!’ He calls from the pool. ‘I don’t ever remember water as good as this in late April.’

The Baths attract a strange collection of people: muscly swimmers who do their smooth laps up and down, making those of us swimming our awkward breathy lengths envious of their grace and endurance, people from Eastern Europe who have never mastered the crawl and breast-stroke with heads lifted stiffly from the water, women doing complicated aerobics, young men with football injuries who walk up and down, their muscles soothed by the unique sandy bottom of the pool,
a leathery-skinned old woman who dunks herself between sessions of sunbaking and sits at lunchtime, delicately eating her sandwiches and scattering crumbs to the clustering gulls.

Most of the year-round swimmers are middle aged or old. In summer, the pool is transformed with families picnicking, small children with floaties, older ones bombing from the board, scantily clad teenagers showing off to one another. There are swimming classes as well as elementary classes in snorkelling and scuba diving. A surprising variety of fish can be seen in the deeper part of the big pool as well as in the rock pools surrounding the Baths.

On fine winter mornings, the dressing shed is a genial place. ‘Oh that was wonderful!’ sighs a small woman with an English accent. ‘If only they knew what they were missing.’ But it’s the absence of the they, that makes these cold weather exchanges such a conspiracy of delight. Inhibitions are stripped off with wet swimmers. ‘You’re lucky you haven’t got breasts,’ says the woman dressing next to me. I’m compelled then to share with her the agonies I went through as a young woman longing for a full bosom. ‘Oh it’s all right when you’re young and firm,’ she says. ‘But look how floppy I am now.’ An attractive women in her mid fifties describes a man she met yesterday at the Club. ‘He’s dry. I’ve never met such a dry man.’ Then later on she whispers, ‘And he’s masterful.’ Her voice is as love-sick as a teenager’s.

When the weather is cold and sunless, the dressing sheds become grim and almost menacing. One day as I was dressing in one of the cubicles to avoid the strong wind, I heard an argument going on outside. A woman was accusing another of having seduced her husband. The argument grew to such a pitch, I decided it was safer to stay behind the closed door until they went away. When I did emerge, I was relieved to find only one woman still there. But as she began to speak, ignoring my presence, I realised that there had only ever been one person and this woman in front of me, had been playing both parts as skilfully as an actress. Another time, I was alone in the sheds when a young man walked in. Deciding my best defence was attack. I wrapped my towel around me and began to reprimand him, telling him he shouldn’t be in the women’s shed. He looked at me, wide eyed and chastened and left the place without a word.

A public facility with easy access attracts eccentrics and it’s interesting to see the warning sign,

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WASHING OF PERSONAL
CLOTHING AND OTHER ITEMS
IS NOT ALLOWED IN
SHOWER OR CHANGE ROOM
AREA
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I’ve seen an occasional bag lady bring more than her soap into the shower but the only time I’ve felt compelled to intervene was when two primary school girls sat
themselves under the shower, began chatting as the water sprayed onto them and seemed determined to continue their watery conversation as long as the heat kept flowing.

Photographers, print-makers, painters have all found the Ocean Baths a compelling subject and a yearly sculpture exhibition is held here. The Baths featured in the film, *The Young Einstein*, and are a favourite background for advertisements. A girl in an old fashioned one-piece costume, arranges herself on the diving board, while an assistant holds up an anti-glare board and the photographer snap-snaps. Adult baptisms take place here with dark suited onlookers and decently covered postulants awaiting immersion. And there are brides galore. One Saturday, I watched a wedding party pose in front of the blue and cream façade of the Baths. The bride wore her hair in an extravagant style, her veil massed around her, her dress similarly bouffant. She stood with her tuxedoed groom, six bridesmaids and groomsmen, all of them wearing their grand
clothes and little John Lennon sunglasses. They smiled their matching smiles into the western sun.

Work began on the construction of the Newcastle Ocean Baths in 1913 although the official opening didn’t take place till nine years later. What a mighty undertaking this was by the city fathers and the people of Newcastle were justly proud. The Newcastle Morning Herald (22/11/1922) claimed the new Baths as probably the finest in the Commonwealth. The swimming area is certainly larger than any other enclosed baths in Australia. An article from the Souvenir Civic Week, 1929, explained that the Ocean Baths were cut out of solid rock with cement walls and went on to give a summary of the Baths special features. Reinforced concrete buildings, consisting of administrative offices, dressing pavilion (with lockers and cubicles) for both sexes, lessee’s quarters, cafe and swimming club rooms. Brilliantly illuminated at night and situated at the tramway terminus in the city, these baths enjoy deserved popularity. Thousands of school children attend in classes weekly during the summer months. Sea water is changed daily by powerful electric pumps.

The trams have gone, the pumping system is quite changed and intermittent wild weather has necessitated continuing repairs and modifications. One unexpected change occurred in October, 1953, when entrance to the Baths was made free. But in spite of this bonus, children today aren’t as reliant upon the Baths as the thousands who came in the first eager years. Nor are the mothers, many of whom were given special instruction at the Ocean Baths by Ruby Burns in the fifties and sixties. Suburban municipal pools, private pools and lately the University’s swimming complex, The Forum, have taken over much of the teaching as well as providing more satisfactory venues for swimming carnivals.

The Ocean Baths remain the choice of those of us who prefer the aesthetic and therapeutic advantages of sea-water bathing. And those too who appreciate a link with the past. For all the changes, the two pools are recognizably the same as the ones built in the early years. The dressing sheds are old fashioned with a number of cubicles and several long benches open to the sky, providing an advantage over many modern sheds, by not becoming dank and smelly. Birds make their nests in the corners and it’s not uncommon for us to dress to the low wavering co-roo-coo of pigeons.

Admonitions from the past surround us.

NUDE SUN-BASKING
IN DRESSING SHED
PROHIBITED
PLACE ALL REFUSE
IN BINS PROVIDED

Another repeats the warning.
What sensual delights are conjured up by *sun-basking* and *loitering*, and I would protest loudly if anyone tried to translate these signs into more modern, less evocative words.

Something else has given me an almost proprietorial interest in the Baths. Ten years ago, I found out almost by accident, that someone very close to me had visited these baths well before I was born. This came as a complete surprise and though I did my best to find out the details of what had happened, I had little success. My curiosity was only appeased, when imagination stepped in to help me establish the Newcastle Ocean Baths as part of my family’s mythology.
Every time the two of them go for a ride in the car, there is an argument.
‘I don’t want it on. It’s too tight.’
‘It’s got to be tight to keep you safe.’
She pulls against the strap. ‘Look I’ll hold it,’ she says, gripping the silver tab.
‘You mustn’t hold it. We could have an accident. A policeman might stop us.’
‘No-one’s going to see me.’ and she continues to strain against the belt.
‘Mum, if you want a ride in this car, you’ve got to wear a seat belt.’
The old woman allows the belt to be pulled across her and clicked into the socket. ‘It’s not normal,’ she complains.
‘Why do you have to make a fuss about such a little thing?’ But her mother isn’t listening. She is looking at the gardens as they drive along the street. ‘Oh,’ she says sighing. ‘they’re so beautiful. Look at those big ones.’
‘They’ve got their spring leaves Mum. And aren’t the flowers lovely?’
‘It’s all lovely. And the sun’s warm. It was cold in your house. Look at all those,’ she points out at the main road as they wait to make a right hand turn. ‘Oh I love them.’
‘The cars — you mean the cars?’
‘Look at that one,’ and she laughs as a truck trundles past.
‘We might see some trains at the Station. Remember when you used to catch the train to come up to us?’
‘What’s a train?’
The daughter begins to search for a way of explaining but her mind is tired.
‘When we pass the station at Broadmeadow, I’ll show you.’ She realises immediately she’s said the wrong thing. The sight of the trains will start her mother off again. ‘I’ve got to go home,’ she’ll say. ‘I’ve been here all these weeks. I’ve got cleaning to do and I have to see the letters.’ Then the daughter will have to try to explain that the doctor doesn’t want her to go home. And her mother will take no notice. She will insist she has to go back. The daughter has become so agitated, she’s forgotten to change route. They are driving on the overhead bridge near Broadmeadow Station. She holds her breath, waiting for her mother to speak.
But nothing is said as they pass the trains. After a few minutes the old woman points to the road in front of her. ‘Come on, we can move.’
‘Not till the arrow turns green, Mum. You tell me when it changes.’
After they make their turn, they get every green light along King Street and her mother remains quiet, lulled by the motion.

The daughter drives down to the Baths and parks with the nose of the car facing the circular wading pool at the end of the beach. ‘It’s sunny here, Mum, and you can watch the children playing on the sand.’

Her mother has already undone the seat belt ‘Go on, she says, ‘you have your swim and I’ll do my work.’ She takes her crochet out of her bag.

The daughter closes the car door behind her and feels a cold wind from the south. She doesn’t want to swim and she wouldn’t have thought of it except that it provides an outing for her mother and some physical activity for herself. She walks through the entrance gate and looks at the two big pools of the Ocean Baths. The place is in shadow and the grey cement is uninviting. Only one man is swimming. The wind is even stronger now. It catches in the black plastic swirled around the northern end of the dressing sheds where workmen are doing repairs. Such an exposed place with the battering of sea and wind.

She takes off her track suit and scuffs, puts on her cap and walks to the edge of the smaller pool. The water is grey and crinkled by the wind. She walks down the rough cement of the ramp and into the water. She feels the shock of the wetness up to her waist, then she begins to tip-toe so that the water creeps slowly up her body. ‘You’re mad — quite mad,’ she says to herself. ‘Is this anything but torture?’ Then suddenly, almost surprising herself, she starts to swim, her arms fanning out into the water. The cold moves from her breasts and along her upper arms until both sides of her neck are aching. Her head stays warm. She has learnt the value of wearing a cap.

She does not swim well. She never did get the breathing right even when she was younger. Now she avoids overarm and moves with a slow breaststroke, trying to keep her breathing regular but finds as she becomes tired that she gulps water, spoiling the rhythm. No enjoyment for her in the swimming but at least a singleness of purpose. She will swim six lengths before she allows herself to get out, run to the sheds and comfort herself with a hot shower.

Every day she’s been coming since her mother has been with her but she still has to goad herself with rewards. After two lengths, she turns onto her back and kicks. She likes to look up to the moving clouds and feel her breathing return to normal, then she turns over and begins to breaststroke again. Lately she has discovered that if she is alone in the pool, not worrying what others will think, she will lie on her back and let the water carry her where it will. No effort on her part, no anxiety; a precious moment of abandonment. She is swimming again — slow awkward scoops with her arms and legs. Perhaps she should take lessons — get advice about the breathing. She keeps on now in her shambly way, up and down, from one big black 5 to the other until she’s completed the necessary lengths.
Suddenly overhead and so big she can feel the pressure of its weight, flies a pelican. She is startled by the span of its wings and its long bill. She lies on her back and watches as it comes to land on one of the wooden light-poles at the edge of the adjoining pool.

So fanciful this bird — like a child’s toy. She smiles at the exaggerated plumpness of its chest and a beak that might have been made of plastic. Strange that the pelican should have been considered a symbol of sacrifice. Legend said the mother was prepared to feed her young from her own flesh rather than see her chicks go hungry.

The pelican stands with his neck stretched tall, surveying the pool and the wide sweep of the sea. A flock of gulls flies near him. He tilts his bill and makes a grotesque clacking to frighten them. The gulls scatter. The pelican moves his feet from side to side in an impatient waddle, ready for the next contender. No sacrifice for this pelican. Aggressive, loud, intolerant; at home with his larrakin self.

She has finished her swimming but for the sake of the pelican and her joy in seeing him, she decides to do one more length on her back and a final one of breaststroke.

She looks at the yellow-green lichen growing on the cement, the big numbers at either end of the pool, the vulgar painted steps that serve as seats on the northern side. She has grown to like the grand ugliness of this place.

Her body is warm after the swimming. She goes to the dressing sheds but decides against a hot shower. She rubs herself with the towel, dresses, and thinks about taking a closer look at the pelican. No, she has a better idea. She will bring her mother to see the bird.

‘It’s cold here,’ the old woman complains. ‘You should have left me sitting.’
‘Look Mum, see the bird at the top of the pole?’
The pelican tips his head and looks down.

The old woman will not focus on the bird. She looks around her. She walks back to the picnic tables. She looks down at the pools on the landing beneath. ‘I came here with the children,’ she says. ‘We came every day to the water.’
‘You’re thinking of somewhere in Sydney, Mum. Some other baths near the ocean.’
‘We walked here,’ says the old woman. ‘And I would carry the baby.’
‘No Mum,’ the daughter explains. ‘We didn’t ever come to the Baths when our children were babies.’

The old woman grows angry. ‘I came here every day, I tell you.’
They are back in the car now and the old woman does not protest about the seat belt. ‘All night on the ship and we came in the morning.’
‘By train, Mum. You would have come by train.’ She has said the censored word without realising it.
‘Home in the train. We came in the ship.’
The daughter does not contradict but that night after her mother has gone to bed, she tells her husband. 'Mum was so mixed up, she told me she came to Newcastle in a ship.'

'That's not so far-fetched,' he says to her. 'The coastal steamer used to be the most convenient way of coming here. Don't you remember they were talking about restoring the trip to attract tourists?'

First thing the next morning, she goes alone to the Baths. She looks on the wall of the caretakers residence but finds nothing. She goes out again and examines the newly painted façade. Suddenly, there before her, not one but two plaques, the first giving the names of the aldermen, the other giving the date of the opening. 1922. Her mother and her family came to Sydney from their Greek island in 1924, so it is possible. But why in the thirty years her mother has been visiting them in Newcastle hasn't she said something before?

The next day, she cajoles her mother to walk with her into the Baths. They go past the women's sheds, past the blackboard that gives the water temperature, down the semi-circular steps that lead to the pool level. 'Did you swim here, Mum, when you came with the children?'

'No, no,' her mother says. 'You swim. I sit in the car and do my crochet. Now take me back, I'm cold.'

'But Mum, you told me about the Baths — how you used to carry the baby. Remember how you told me?' Her mother looks at her blankly. When she is sitting again in the car, she takes out her wool and starts to crochet.

Up and down as she swims her lengths, the daughter is thinking of her mother and the years between her arrival in Sydney and her marriage in 1936. She knows roughly where the family lived but there are no photos of her mother as a small girl. She remembers some talk of her mother being allowed to swim with her older brother in the harbour at Castellorizo. But as she grew older, there would surely have been restrictions as there would have been with all Greek girls nearing puberty.

All day she continues her questions, but her mother will say nothing. In desperation, the daughter rings her mother's remaining brother. 'Theo Andreas did you know that Mum visited Newcastle when she was a girl?'

'Can you imagine your Buppoo allowing her to go away from the family?'

'I know he was strict.'

'Strict!' He didn't want any of us to be independent and when I married your Aunty, Joyce, he wouldn't see me for almost a year. Oh you kids don't know what strict is.'

'But she seemed so sure, Theo Andreas. Can you think of any of our relatives who lived in Newcastle?'

'Look,' he says, impatiently. 'They all stayed in Sydney, the inner-city places, Wooloomooloo, Annandale, Darlington — and we lived on top of shops —
grotty little places and people insulted us, called us *Dagos*, because we looked different.’

He is on his hobby horse and she doesn’t want to listen. ‘I have to go now, Theo. I’ll ring again tomorrow.’

But he is the one who rings back. ‘I’ve thought of who it might have been.’ He is excited now by his revelation. ‘Your mother’s *Nona*, Sotiria. They were in Newcastle a few years before they came back to Sydney. That was one family your Buppy might have made an exception for.’

It makes sense. She remembers how lovingly her mother spoke of her godmother, Sotiria. There were jokes in the family about the meaning of their surname, Carpouzi, and she smiles at the thought of her mother spending a week in Newcastle with Mr. and Mrs. Watermelon and their family.

When her uncle rings again, she is surprised. ‘There was someone else,’ he tells her. ‘One of our closest neighbours in Castellorizo who came about the same time as we did to Sydney, then moved to Newcastle. Well, Dhespina had a bad time giving birth and she’d come down to Sydney to see a specialist. She and the baby stayed with us. Perhaps your mother went back with Dhespina to Newcastle for a while.’

She considers what he has said. Her mother would have been ten in 1926, eleven in 1927. Perhaps Dhespina had felt sorry for the young girl having to help in the shop. But wouldn’t she have been taking her back to another shop in Newcastle?

Now as she does her laps at the Baths, she thinks of her mother as a ten year old and tries to work out the more likely of the two suggestions. She cannot decide but she is sure of one thing. Her mother loved the ocean. On family outings to the beach, she remembers watching with wonder her mother’s plump and stiffly-held body suddenly tumble and frolic and float and swim, agile as a child again in the sea’s translucent alchemy.
If you never offer your uncle palmwine, you’ll not learn many proverbs, prompts a Ghanaian saying. The advice seems to have been well-heeded. Whether painted across the fronts of speeding mammy-wagons or issuing from the mouth of a roadside mechanic or a paramount chief, proverbs throughout West Africa are in plentiful supply. Naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals; conversations in urban beer-parlours or by the palm-winetapper’s fire; traditional folk-tales, some modern West African novels, highlife lyrics: These are just a few possible sources. Sierra Leoneans say: Proverbs are the daughters of experience. Or to put it another way, When the occasion comes, the proverb comes (Oji, Ghana).

Whereas in Western societies proverbs have been mostly relegated to quaint decoration, in West Africa they are still part-and-parcel of everyday discourse, a sort of soundbite for the everyman. Thus the claim: When a proverb is told, only a fool needs it explained. Proverbs are horses for solving problems notes another example. When truth is missing, proverbs are used to uncover it. And if the thought expressed is often less than original, it doesn’t matter: Other people’s wisdom frequently prevents the chief from being called a fool. As a Yoruba saying has it: He who knows proverbs can settle disputes. Not only can a well-aimed proverb save a thousand words of explanation, it can also help in discussing awkward home truths with a minimum of embarrassment. Seriousness and humour, focus and distance, are authoritatively combined. Perhaps this is what underlies: When a chief deals out a dish, it becomes cold.

One practical function of proverbs, then, is keeping matters in perspective. Indeed the structure of many proverbs resembles a pair of scales. There are forty kinds of madness, only one kind of common sense (Akan, Ghana). The idea of balance is also found in: Exuberance is not good, but meanness is not good at all. More symmetrical still is: When your guns are few, your words are few (Oji). There’s further weighing things up in This year’s wisdom is next year’s folly. Striking a happy medium, a Yoruba proverb reminds parents: If with the right hand you flog a child, with the left draw him to your breast. The telling contrast also serves to highlight the wider scheme of things: When carrying elephant’s flesh on one’s head, one should not look for crickets underground. Or, for a different occasion: The keeping of one’s head exceeds the keeping of one’s hat (Fulani).
Paradox is majestically embodied in the Akan: The moon moves slowly, yet it crosses the town. Continuing the theme of measurement and scale, consider: Debt is measured in a hippo's footprints (Tiv, Central Nigeria). And truth? According to the Ibo, it is worth more than a dozen goats.

Already we see how animals are a common proverbial feature. One reason, as in folk tales, is to provide an element of humour. If a baboon could see his behind, he'd laugh also, and The cock crows proudly on his own dunghill are just two examples. A second reason is that animals supply easy scapegoats for our all-too-human failings. On our general fallibility we get: A horse has four legs, yet often falls (Tiv). For laziness: The dog's happy dream produces no meat. For the nastier type of opportunism: Ants surround the dying elephant. On the non-payment of debt: Spider hides under a stone (Ewe, Ghana). On the age-old gap between rich and poor, you may hear the pidgin: Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop. For obstinacy, or a heavyweight equivalent of the English dog in a manger: The hippo blocked the road and nobody could get across (Tiv). For caution: In new surroundings the hen walks on one leg (Ibo). To conjure a sinister sense of occasion the Ibo use: The toad does not jump in the daylight for nothing. Even more disquietingly portentous is the Sierra Leonean: The bat hangs downwards because of the words told it by the sun. As a portrait of the very human know-all, it'd be hard to beat the Yoruba: 'I know it perfectly' prevents the wasp from learning to make honey. Arrogance, for better or worse, is vividly dealt with in: The lizard jumped down from the Iroko tree, and said, 'If there is nobody else to praise me, I will praise myself'.

In the world of proverbs not only animals take on human dimensions; so, rather more ingeniously, do everyday objects. The axe forgets; the tree does not, states one vivid example. An empty sack cannot stand up, a full sack cannot bend, cautions another from Nigeria, in a homely expression of the golden mean. Respect for the elders is embodied in A pond is not a companion to a river (Ibo); secrecy in Try to hide your secret and even grass is a spy; the dangers of opinionation in the animistic: The stream won't be advised; therefore its path is crooked. For an emphatic equivalent of our own English proverb, remember: Walls have ears, and little pots too. As an injunction against haste, the Ga say: A hot needle burns the thread. For the delicate business of looking for a wife or husband, one might use, There's a lid for every pot, a key for every lock. And then, after finding one, try: The cleared field looks good, the growing crop looks better; this is a proverbial echo of the more literal Children's laughter is music to the ears of the elders (Akan). For co-operation, marital or otherwise, take the mysteriously obvious: The sharpest knife cannot carve its own handle. For a less than ideal view of family there's the Duala saying: The spear of kinship soon pierces the eye. The same language expresses the naturalness of hard work in the more peaceable: The pot is not tired of cooking. To bring home the division of labour, the Ho in Ghana use other utensils: The spoon does his job, the dish does his. On the possibly
unfair results of work (or lack of it), we are counselled: *The pot cooks; the plate gets the name.*

Communication depending largely on what we have in common, a further source of proverbial metaphor is, not surprisingly, the human body. So, for a nurturist view of crime, ponder: *The stomach has done the head an injury* (Duala). Covetousness is embodied in the Efik: *The eye is a thief.* On appetite we have the festive *The beard dances when food approaches.* As for the inevitability of arguments, the proof is in our very mouths: *Even the tongue and the teeth quarrel now and then.* On talkativeness in old age, there is the ageless: *Although the teeth drop out, the tongue does not tire.* Then, on how words can be literally a matter of life and death: *The tongue kills a man; the tongue saves a man* (Oji). The mouth features yet again in the Ewe: *The gums understand the teeth’s affairs.* Against pride, there’s a point-blank riposte in the Nigerian: *A big head is a big load.*

So much for the head. Let’s now move lower down. *The house of the heart is never full,* swells a saying from the Duala, this echoed elsewhere by Yoruba’s similarly emotive *A man’s heart is like an ocean; all the oceans cannot fill it.* (As a second thought Duala has an alternative proverb in: *The heart’s case is hard to open.*) Specifically for travellers, a Nigerian proverb advises, *The traveller leaves his heart at home.* Co-operation, a bodily necessity, is again expressed in *One can’t tie a bundle with only one hand.* Below the waist we meet the lowly suggestive: *The laughing penis does not enter* (Akan.) Continuing downward: *A man’s legs are his brothers and sisters; on what else can he rely?* Or to rephrase it with a different limb: *The soles of the feet may feed the mouth* (Duala).

Many West African proverbs, however, dispense with metaphors completely, making do with sharp-eyed observation, arresting reportage. *Three men can ruin a country,* resounds with the air of historical truth. Like a bizarre newspaper headline, an Oji saying announces: *The feast reveals the European’s wooden leg.* Proving how a single proverb can save several paragraphs of tedious moralising and still stick better in the memory: *When the slave-trader preaches the Koran, it’s time to watch over one’s daughters.* Equally concise yet recognisable: *You hide your faults behind a wall, parade your neighbour’s in the marketplace.* From the Yoruba we have *Ask for alms and see the misers while, to bring a smile to the sternest moralist, another proverb stipulates: He who excretes in the road will likely meet flies on his return.* Sermon over. Similar matter-of-factness features in *Your wife’s tongue can turn your friends into enemies.* Still on the cynical side of truth, consider the ‘I told you so’: *If you want to be blamed, marry. If you want to be praised, die.* In one sentence a proverb often provides a character sketch which might take a novelist whole pages. So for entrepreneurs we get the cunning cameo: *Having become rich, jump for joy in a quiet corner.* Or from the Ho in Ghana: *The water-carrier drinks no slime.* Worth a chapter out of ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People’ is *A soft voice loosens the gift from the Chief’s hands.* Meanwhile for those seeking fame and worried about their height, the Nupe observe
how: A man's never so tall that he can be seen in the next town; it's his name that goes before. Teachers everywhere might want to use the Fulani: Nobody is without knowledge except they who ask no questions, or, as pithy again, the Gambian: Not to know is bad; not to want to know is worse.

Obvious enough, yet many proverbs work by spotlighting those daily realities we prefer to ignore. All the sages in the land cannot prevent misfortune, is one such rhetorical reminder. One cannot take medicine for someone else; Who can make another woman his own mother?; Without children the world would end; There's no medicine against old age are four others. Not that the obvious doesn't have a cunning corner or two: The doctor is never killed when the patient dies (Ibo). In a similar vein is: When really big business is on hand, the flag is not flown. Or, as a timely put-down: A man may be famous in the world, yet small in his own house. Equally beady-eyed is: The mistaken doctor leaves by the backdoor. Then, showing how obviousness is relative, there's the sniggeringly accurate: The news has gone round and round, yet the person it concerns is deaf (Ibo). More disconcertingly general is the Hausa Love yourself and others will hate you; hate yourself and others will love you. Lest all this proverbial advice and censure makes us self-righteous, the Akan have an antidote: If you have an anus, do not laugh at your neighbour's farts. As they say in Kamtok, a Cameroonian pidgin: Man no dey fit look other man's buttocks wey dey no show he own.

Not all proverbs are as down to earth as the ones just quoted. Passed down by the ancestors, many West African proverbs are distinctly otherworldly, a homespun guide to the Great Beyond. The words of an epileptic are the utterances of a dweller of another world, warns a saying in Yoruba. Another states A cripple may serve the gods as a porter at the gate. Throughout West Africa the supernatural is never far away. God creates dreams say the Efik in Eastern Nigeria. That the supernatural has a horrific side is shown in: A sorcerer's zombie dies twice. As alarming is A witch can harm you with your own footprints. Along with references to possession and witchcraft, we are also handed tips on how to deal with ghosts: When a ghost puts its hand, draw yours back. More eerie etiquette is available in this adage from Ghana where local custom demands food be left wherever it may have dropped: A ghost does not wait for the living to eat before it begins to eat. On the strange phenomenon of wait-about ghosts or the spirits of those killed before their time, the advice goes; It's the living man who causes the ghost to long for mashed yam (Akan). Or, to explain the existence of such a ghost in the first place: The Supreme Being has driven him out, the spirit folk have driven him out. Still sceptical? Well, also Akan, is the caution: The native doctor tells of his victories, not of his defeats.

Related to the otherworldly is the subject of death or Sleep's elder brother as a Nupe saying puts it — not so much a taboo as a proverbial favourite. The priest will die; the doctor will depart this life; nor will the sorcerer be spared, warns an Ibo saying matter-of-factly. The same fate lies in store for the miser, as in the
Akan: *Death has the keys to the miser’s chest.* Equally salutary is the Ibo, *The day one knows all, let him die.* From the same language comes what might serve as a motto for travellers on Nigeria’s roads: *He who fears for his life is liable to be killed by a falling leaf.* Rather less menacingly an Akan proverb says, *If you want to know death, look on sleep.* Yet Death is nothing if not many-sided: *The old man runs away from death; the young child stands and stares at it.* Sometimes death comes quickly as in: *A man’s death is but a day* (Nyang, Cameroon). Sometimes not so quickly: *Little by little the leper pays his debt to the grave* (Nupe, Northern Nigeria). Or, for the two time frames merged into one metaphysical paradox, the Nupe have: *Death is the owner of the house and is no stranger, yet when it comes it will be a stranger that day.*

Last and perhaps foremost on the West African proverbial agenda is not death but Providence. A trip to any West African ‘moto-park’ will bear this out, the vehicles there painted with mottoes like ‘God Dey’, ‘Destiny’, ‘Not as You Think’, ‘God’s Time De Best’, ‘Who Knows Tomorrow’, and ‘God Never Sleeps’. Also reminding us that there are higher powers than magic, one proverb says, *It is God who pours rain for the sorcerer’s garden.* From Hausa, West Africa’s lingua franca, comes: *A grain of wheat upon a rock — God must give it water.* Or again: *If you’re going to ask from God, make sure you take a big calabash.* If one saying wittily stipulates *Not even God is ripe enough for a woman in love,* (Yoruba) another acknowledges how the same God *pounds fufu for the one-armed woman* (Akan), *drives flies from the tailless cattle* (Yoruba), *fills your gourd with palmwine and when you throw it way, fills it up for you once more.* The Nupe express this idea with: *God who made the mouth will not sew it up.* If the Supreme Being gives you sickness, *He gives you medicine as well,* says the Akan. Most poetic of all, perhaps, is a parallel proverb from the same language: *If God gave the swallow nothing else, he gave him swiftness in turning.*

In the light of such sayings, we can better appreciate the Ibo assertion that *The calabash of the ear is never full.* If *Tales are the ear’s food,* then, as the Ibo also put it, *Proverbs are the pepper with which words are eaten,* — a kind of palaver sauce with properties its leafy Chop Bar equivalent cannot match.

**NOTES**

1 *The ear is never full.* Taking this proverb as a motto, I gathered much of this material by keeping an ear open at various naming ceremonies, weddings and other occasions both in Ghana and Nigeria where I worked for several years. Other proverbs were provided by friends: Thomas Agwu, Isaac Sonny Mensah, Atemkeng Achanga, Kiki Soumah, and also by my Ghanian wife and various in-laws. I also relied on Rattray’s OUP collection of Ghanian proverbs, now out of print, and other proverb collections of which there are several. Further sources include the backs of speeding mammy-wagons (*‘He who fears for his life will be killed by a falling leaf’*), highlife song-titles and lyrics, and finally modern African novels, those of Chinua Achebe being particularly rich in this regard.
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CLEM O’LOUGHLIN was born and grew up on Point Pearce Aboriginal Mission on the west coast of York Peninsula, South Australia. He has worked variously as a rabbit-trapper, fruitpicker, shearer, driver and South Australia’s first Aboriginal driving instructor. He worked for almost twenty-five years at Tauondi, formerly the Aboriginal Community College, in Port Adelaide. He was named NAIDOC Aboriginal Elder of the Year in 1999 and South Australia’s Outstanding Older Learner in 1999. He is still studying and has been working on his autobiography for several years.

REBECCA PANNELL is currently researching a doctoral thesis on transgression and religion in Australian performance texts through Flinders University in the Schools of Theology and Australian Studies. Her research interests extend into areas of post-colonial and marginal texts as well as Christological and historical representations of Jesus on film. She has a theatre background and has worked with several theatre companies throughout Australia both on stage and as a dramaturg and researcher.

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KUNAPIPI

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INTERVIEW
Patricia Grace in interview with Michelle Keown

COVER and FEATURE: Raghupathi Bhatta