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Anne Brewster

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Abstract
Australia is a nation formed by immigration. Nationalism's project is to recuperate or domesticate the centripetal forces immigrant constituencies engender within the culturally homogenous formation of the nation. It aims to construct a national ethno-history but in Australia ethnic constituencies' memory is plural and recent. One means by which compatriots can be turned into co-nationals is through their mobilisation into the vernacular language. Language plays an important role in the construction of any Nationalism as it is the medium by which individuals are interpellated as subjects in culture. It has what Etienne Balibar describes as a specifically 'plastic' role in multi-ethnic communities,1 in the sense that it naturalises new speakers quickly and assimilates them, but without providing the closure and exclusion that nationalism has traditionally needed to function efficiently. This closure has been supplied in the discourse of Australian nationalism by the rhetoric of multiculturalism and ethnicity.2
In addition, the book concludes with the following phrases:

- village councils; later, I was raped by the soldiers at the station. One more, another they raped me. To keep my lips and hold back the screams. I was cold and tired. Then they took me away to the prison. My hair was split for information. Eight months later, heavy with child, I escaped to the west. To the empty wall that lay forgotten in the sacred land before the university. Where child have I given this to?

- Peace is never. Happiness is never. Freedom is never. I am alone, the consciousness wanders between births. Detach. But through the infinite distance of my childhood, I hear the barks. And the dreams speak. I am in to my father. Together, we tread the leaves between the pages of a book of scriptures. Each week, out of the golden sand, we pick a true green leaf that the tree has just shed. At the end of the year, I shake
ANNE BREWSTER

Ania Walwicz's Vagrant Narration: Cosmopolitanism vs Nationalism in Australian 'Migrant Writing'

Australia is a nation formed by immigration. Nationalism's project is to recuperate or domesticate the centripetal forces immigrant constituencies engender within the culturally homogenous formation of the nation. It aims to construct a national ethno-history but in Australia ethnic constituencies' memory is plural and recent. One means by which compatriots can be turned into co-nationals is through their mobilisation into the vernacular language. Language plays an important role in the construction of any nationalism as it is the medium by which individuals are interpellated as subjects in culture. It has what Etienne Balibar describes as a specifically 'plastic' role in multi-ethnic communities, in the sense that it naturalises new speakers quickly and assimilates them, but without providing the closure and exclusion that nationalism has traditionally needed to function efficiently. This closure has been supplied in the discourse of Australian nationalism by the rhetoric of multiculturalism and ethnicity.

In this paper I examine the work of Polish-Australian writer Ania Walwicz. Her recent book *red roses* exemplifies this 'plasticity' of language and discourse; its emphasis on the performative nature of ethnicity and gender, parody multiculturalism's project of institutionalising memory and museumising ethnicity. By foregrounding the performative body and the performative voice, the text focuses on the fictionality of representation and the instability of meaning and evokes the fluid, shifting and composite space of the traveller. My discussion of *red roses* will suggest that Australian literature is characterised as much by cosmopolitan as by national formations, by figurations of migrancy as much as by those of national situatedness.

*red roses* is clearly a book that hovers on the border between autobiography and fiction. Autobiography has traditionally explored the lives of representative individuals, where representativeness articulates dominant cultural discourses. *red roses* can be seen as similarly representative, but of the collective memory of a minority group, a constituency that has been silent. It is also representatively political in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari describe all minority texts as political. The autobiographies and
the memory of minority constituencies cannot be unscrambled from the representations of dominant cultural discourses. However, these representations, I argue, are appropriated and fragmented by minority constituencies' memory in a way that foregrounds their relativity and fictionality. As the text of a minority group that has been silent, the role of memory is very important in that constituency's project of constructing a self. As one shall see from my analysis of *red roses*, this self is self-reflexive and performative, and interrogates the notion of representation rather than simply replicating dominant discourses. *red roses* is a fabrication of the self that names itself as such.

Remembering is an important aspect of fabricating a self: 'i believe that a person's life really begins with what they can remember for themselves' (p. 129), states the narrator. Her journey into the past takes as its starting point the image of the mother and makes forays into the past in order to 'return to a former time. I want to buy my time back. I am getting her time' (p. 52). This is a project that is fraught with mismatching and illusion however: 'i am returning to a former time in history books they are telling her stories and mine i'm never just here at the right time' (p. 93). The narrator rejects history, ultimately, in favour of a form of recollection that acknowledges the slippages, the gaps, the unreliability of memory and discourse: 'i wanted to invent myself' she says; 'i was overburdened with all that history' (p. 176). This form of recollection, which gives rise to the collage textuality of *red roses*, could be compared to Foucault's notions of archaeology and genealogy rather than the conventional discourse of history and the linear narrative of the historian.

In the first few pages of the text the narrator explores fantasies of origin. She seeks out her 'certificate of birth' (pp. 3,15); this is followed by a number of scenarios in which she plays around with plots or scripts which invent different parents ('i was a daughter of barons they left me on her doorstep i was born an egyptian princess' (p. 16); 'my father was an admiral an owner of hotels she was a opera singer' (p. 18); 'my parents were french they were fashionable people farming' (p. 19); 'my parents nobles in england i was sent to boarding school' (p. 37) etc). These fantasies serve to foreground the fictional and inventive nature of *red roses*.

The journey into the past is one from silence into language: 'i am a beast in a sub-human state is a metaphor for minority people's condition of being voiceless and invisible. The journey into language starts with making contact (metaphorically) with the mother. This is a dialogic process; the narrator speaks (to) the mother and in turn the mother/text 'speak' her. The text makes frequent use of the vocative voice as the narrator exhorts the mother to reply: 'will you send me a letter [sic] or a telegram will you tell me ... your address your telegram number' (p. 2); 'please return my letters' (p. 3). Inevitably, there is no response directly from the mother; the process of writing can
be seen as the invocation of an addressee/muse who is always necessarily absent. In this way writing epitomises the paradox at the heart of signification or representation, namely that the referent is always absent. The journey in search of the mother/language is thus a journey which never finally realises its destination. The mother symbolises the absent referent which can never be fully realised in language: the narrator describes her and her ‘talk’ as a phantom and a ghost: ‘she is saying me now the phantom talk of mum the ghost’ (p. 11). Paradoxically, language, like memory, ‘speaks’ (from) absence. This paradox, by extension, foregrounds the phantasmatic nature of the metaphors of the mother-tongue and the mother-country so intrinsic to the originary discourse of nationalism.

Although the mother is positioned as the addressee or narratee of the text, there is slippage in the pronoun ‘she’ which is rarely attached to a proper name, and yet clearly refers to more than one particular woman. Throughout the course of the narrative the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘you’ apparently refer to several women, however the lack of differentiation between these women collapses them back into the mother: ‘i am writing a letter to you i am writing a letter to mother’ (p. 14). The narrator makes this point even more succinctly when she says: ‘i substitute one woman for another woman’ (p. 170). The narrator also adopts the persona of the mother (‘i am writing a letter to my daughter but she won’t answer’ [p. 85]); in this way the mother is seen to ‘speak’ the daughter. Writing is thus seen as a dialogue with an absent woman. Ultimately this dialogue is a ‘conversation’ with or representation of oneself: ‘she is writing letters to herself’ (p. 14).

The conventions of the narrative strategies of letter-writing by which we invoke and construct both addresser and addressee are parodied in a long sequence which begins as a letter to the narrator’s mother and which turns into a love letter, then a letter breaking an engagement, a legal letter, a sympathy letter, a thank-you letter, a letter of introduction etc. (pp. 145-147). This collage of phrases foregrounds the conventionality of written communication; it also announces which rules Walwicz is breaking in this text: she opens the sequence with the statement, ‘the sentence can be the beginner’ (p. 145), drawing attention to her own delegitimisation of the sentence as the basic unit of written communication. The sequence finishes with the statement that ‘excessive punctuation tends to destroy the flow of a piece of writing’ (p. 147); this reads like a rule of grammar but it is a rule which Walwicz parodically pushes to its limit.

Through the use of the vocative case in the constant address to the mother, we have a strong sense of the oral transaction of language: the narrator tells us that ‘i’m eavesdrop and listening and hearing’ (p. 122), that she’s garnering her voices from the world around her. This orality in turn evokes the body. There are many references to the mouth and the notion of language as exchange, as something we borrow or steal from other people – a process which the art of the collage-maker and the bricoleuse
exemplify – and which never comes to us except by way of someone else (‘you have a way with words they get into my mouth’ (p. 88). The act of exchanging words is a focal one in the text: the mother often exchanges words by singing (pp. 1, 3) and they are also likened to blood (p. 108) or milk (p. 144) in the mouth. The metaphor of language as food is explored on more than one occasion e.g. pp. 30-31. The pre-Oedipal relationship with the maternal body is evoked here, and language is seen not as an aspect of paternal law (as in Lacan) but as having a somatic function, a continuation of the infant’s physical bond with the mother’s body. Other women in the text are seen to evoke this bond with the maternal body and to facilitate language in the same way that the mother does: ‘you talk her through my trance mouth’ (p. 5).

The orality of language is further emphasised in the use of voice as theatre. At one stage the narrator says: ‘i am getting ready the scenario the inevitable play script the necessary language i am monsieur and she is countess’ (p. 58); ‘i speak behind a mask’ (p. 88) she adds. These small theatrical ‘scenarios’ are scattered throughout the text which comprises a collage of ‘character’ voices ranging from Disney cartoon characters and childhood personae to an array of other voices. The collage represents the range of available discourses and representations which are mobilised playfully in the service of desire: ‘i was tired ... of having to be just myself i wanted to be other people too’ (p. 175). What Balibar calls the ‘plasticity’ of language is demonstrated by Walwicz’s virtuoso appropriation of different voices in the collage of red roses. Clearly the vernacular language naturalises the writer and assimilates her to a degree but, by the same token, the narrative voice splits into multiple voices, and thus resists the closure that discourses such as nationalism require.

The sense of the voice as theatre foregrounds the performative aspect of language; ‘all statements are performative’ (p. 119), the narrator tells us and, ‘it’s not what is said it’s in the way of telling’ (p. 130). The notion of the self as performative through language is explored principally in the notion of gender, gender ‘roles’ being epitomised by the various film stars whose voice and image the narrator appropriates at will to fabricate the absent mother and through that metaphor, the self. Ethnicity, like gender, is seen as an assemblage of utterances which can be mobilised in many different ways. In its strategies of pastiche and mimicry, collage promotes thus the play of difference without privileging any discourse over another and avoids the establishment of a hierarchy of discourses. Strategies of pastiche and mimicry are characteristic both of women, for whom femininity is essentially a masquerade, and of minority people whose experience of the dominant discourse is mediated and relativised.

By focusing on language as performance, that is, on its oral and theatrical aspects, the narrative of red roses foregrounds the power of language to fascinate and seduce. Storytelling and the fairy tale have pride of place
in this narrative as they epitomise the experience of fantasy. The magician (p. 131) becomes a metaphor for the writer, whose work is likened to invention (p. 128) and make believe (p. 105). Language, like memory, is unreliable and illusory; the writer is a liar (pp. 9, 26, 68) and a stealer of other people words (p. 74). Also, because it lacks linearity and plot, the collage narrative of red roses is inconclusive, unfinished and open-ended; like the folk story on page 85, it is made up of repetitions with variations and ‘never ends’; with collage, as with memory. ‘there’s always everything unfinished’ (p. 140). Collage, because of its ‘vagrant’ and random nature, militates against the closure of discourses such as nationalism and multiculturalism which produce reified stereotypes. Ethnicity, like gender, is an assemblage of performative acts and choices; it is open-ended and unfinished.

The emphasis on language as performance and on the self as an assemblage of voices, points to the fact that performance is always in excess of knowledge for, as Spivak would have it, ‘knowledge is never adequate to its subject’. The activation of voices in an open-ended collage produces ‘a whole composed of parts and bigger than the parts’ (p. 58); in the telling of the story meaning proliferates: ‘i’m all telling by not telling in that way i tell more and more than i even know’ (p. 147). This type of text clearly involves the reader in a highly participative role as the narrator points out:

i just outline a sketch you never reveal her completely or yourself why do should i you have to make her up i’m just giving suggestions i don’t want to say completely and fully i’m just hinting at a story then you just read me carefully the reader participates the reader reads the reader makes me. (pp. 115-6)

So, although the narrator in her playfulness, which lends a high degree of uncertainty and risk to the process of making sense of the text, is essentially seductive, this is not a passive process for the reader. The reading of collage is highly performative because the syntactic breaks and edits signify in a way that is ambiguous and polysemous. The reader actively makes sense of the text in the same way that we actively construct memory.

Language and memory, as I have suggested, are personified by the mother who is a metaphor for the crisis of representation and identity. Orignary notions of identity are replaced in red roses with ideas of fabrication and constructedness: ‘i didn’t have a mother i am making one up here to ... fill a gap a void i am making up i am making mum talk’ (p. 32). The narrator says ‘i’m just making myself from her and many other things’ (p. 206) signalling the arbitrary nature of the way we construct our origins in memory. The text’s fabrication of the mother draws, as I’ve mentioned, on the techniques of collage: ‘i am sticking toget her [sic] i am attaching with glue out of bits i am making a mother’ (p. 12). Memory’s modus operandi could be said to be that of collage; the narrator
constructs the mother from fragments of language: 'i am making up a mother a biography out of what's said' (p. 79). The collage nature of red roses is most obvious in the fractured syntax and Walwicz's abandonment of the sentence and of punctuation as the structuring principles of writing. The incongruity of syntactic 'edits' imitates the figurative condensation of metaphor or dreaming.

Another level of collage is demonstrated by the many different discourses whose languages erupt into the text. Many of these are discourses from childhood such as fairy stories, folktales, tv cartoons, comics and nursery rhymes. Others are from the media such as advertising, journalaise and popular science; also literary genres such as the detective novel, the romance novel, biographies of film stars, literature and literary theory; and still other genres such as pornography, tour guides, grammar books, women's magazines, travel diaries and the discourse of gardening. On a linguistic level, there is a collage of snippets of French, German and Polish in the text, a multilingualism which creates what the narrator calls 'wordy salads' (p. 77).

As the image of 'wordy salads' suggests, the purpose of collage is not to unify fragments in order to create a coherent, seamless whole but to allow the fragments to maintain their alterity within the whole. The effect is one of randomness and dislocation. Collage encourages a double reading: the fragment is read in both its original context (that is, in relation to its text of origin) and in its new context. In collage intertextuality reigns: 'everything refers a reference' (p. 181). We are reminded of the instability, temporariness and relational and provisional nature of meaning and representation. Discontinuity - between cultures, between childhood and adulthood, and between received representations and the performative aspect of gender and ethnicity - is foregrounded in the collage text of red roses.

The formative trope of collage could be described as metonymic rather than metaphorical. Words are found objects rather than moments of originary consciousness. The modes of detachment, readherence, graft and citation evoke the notion of the world as representation and the notion of the constructedness and intertextuality of language; collage thus exemplifies the condition of the diasporic, the migrant, the exile, the tourist, the refugee, the cosmopolitan and the traveller. red roses can, in this light, be read as a travel diary, a journal or a map. In this last instance Steven Connor's use of the image of the periplus, which maps out a journey one step at a time rather than providing an overview, is relevant, as the narrative of red roses avoids any easy chronological interpretation.

These three genres - the travel diary, journal and map - (and also the genres of tourist guide and phrase books) - are each invoked in the narrative, which moves from place to place (Perth, Sydney, Melbourne, Singapore, Paris, Germany, England, Italy, Poland etc). The journey motif is a dominant one; the narrator announces that 'i am preparing journeys and
maps’ (p. 98), that ‘i have reisen [sic] fieber the fever of travel i am going away soon’ (p. 94) and that she is writing ‘in my travel diary in my diary of travels’ (p. 186). The collage mélange of the narrative, which rarely provides any preamble to a change of setting, invokes both the shifting, fluid world of the traveller and of memory. The narrator’s ‘lack of a solid world’ (p. 206) suggests not only the traveller’s sense of space but also the fluid, shifting, ‘vagrant’ and intertextual nature of representation and signification.

The motif of the journey is also used in the context of the process or passage of reading. The image of the (un)winding thread appears several times and becomes a metaphor for the seduction of the reader. There is an extended passage which starts with the images of first, ravioli, and then jumper unravelling, and precedes, in a style reminiscent of magic realism, to follow the thread around table and chairs, through a room and a dance etc. In this passage the thread clearly symbolises the narrative thread, and the narrator demands cheekily ‘where’s the story now answer a comprehension test’ (p. 66). She adds to this a confession and a prescription: ‘i’m just a fascinator read me slow’ (p. 65).

The most frequent use of the journey motif is, of course, that of the pilgrimage to the mother. This journey is a journey into the past and into memory as I have suggested; its map is the map of collage, a map that is not linear but rhizomatic, fragmented and episodic, like language and memory:

i am trying to solve a riddle or unwind a thread the signs are not systematic they are all intermittent they are flashing on and off i am using an absence in my code a langue i am a signwriter of a sign i am not the i the writer i am just my mum and mums i’m a memory now a flashback. (p. 120)

The pilgrimage to the mother, which concludes in one sense at the Eiffel Tower, is also a ‘reverse journey’ [sic] from the past and memory into the present and language (symbolised respectively by the umbilical cord attaching to the mother and by the typewriter): ‘a reverse journey [sic] now i’ve by now unwound a knot in my stomach a typewriter ribbon’ (p. 207).

If textually the collage of red roses can be said to invoke representational relativity and ‘wandering’, and I have titled this paper the ‘vagrant narration of Ania Walwicz’ to emphasise this idea, collage can be further seen to articulate a political strategy, namely the strategy of migrants and minority constituencies reinscribing themselves not in terms of fixed identities, of an originary, nativist or ethnicist discourse such as multiculturalism, but through mimicry and pastiche of dominant representations. Memory constructs and fabricates a collage from these fragments of discourse and inhabits not the fixed and definitive borders of the multicultural nation but a floating and unstable world, moving along the trajectories of the traveller and the vagrant.
NOTES


2. Throughout this discussion I use the term ‘ethnicity’ to invoke the notion of a cultural construct rather than an inherent, instinctual or natural essence. ‘Ethnic’ markers are always mobilised within specific economic, political and cultural contexts. When mobilised by non Anglo-Saxon minorities in the UK, the USA and Australia, for example, ethnic behaviour and assertion of difference is an expression of resistance to Anglo-Saxon hegemony. When institutionalised, as in the rhetoric of nationalist multiculturalism, the promotion of ethnicity and multiculturalism masks many kinds of difference and conflict, for example, of class relations. See Marie de Lepervanche, ‘From Race to Ethnicity’, ANZIS. 16 (1), 1980, pp. 24-37.

3. Ania Walwicz, red roses (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1992). All references to red roses are to this edition and are included in the text.


