Kunapipi 15 (2) 1993 Full Version

Anna Rutherford

University of Aarhus, Denmark

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol15/iss2/1

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Kunapipi 15 (2) 1993 Full Version

Abstract
Kunapipi 15 (2) 1993 Full Version.

This full issue is available in Kunapipi: http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol15/iss2/1
Kunapiipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (software preferably WordPerfect or Macwrite) and should be accompanied by a hard copy.

All correspondence - manuscripts, books for review, inquiries - should be sent to:

Anna Rutherford
Editor - KUNAPIPI
Department of English
University of Aarhus
8000 Aarhus C
Denmark

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

Individuals: 1 year: DEK150 / £15 / US$35 / AUS$45 / CAN$45
3 years: DEK400 / £40 / US$90 / AUS$120 / CAN$120

Institutions: 1 year: DEK300 / £30 / US$60 / AUS$90 / CAN$90

Please note that if payment is made in currencies other than Danish kroner or by Eurocheque, the equivalent of DEK50 must be added to cover banking costs.

Copyright © 1993 by KUNAPIPI
This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act no part may be reproduced without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the editor.

ISSN 0106-5734
Acknowledgements

*Kunapipi* is published with assistance from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

We are grateful to the Commonwealth Foundation for its support in providing subscriptions to *Kunapipi* for Third World countries.

COVER: Drawing by Jean Arasanayagam.

*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 in Australia.
CONTENTS

FICTION
Jean Arasanayagam, ‘I Am an Innocent Man’ 1
Chandani Lokugé, ‘A Pair of Birds’ 15
Githa Hariharan, ‘Untitled Poem’ 68
Margaret Harris, ‘Theatre of Women’ 77

POETRY
Ashley Halpé, ‘A Threnody’ 13
Marcelle Freiman, ‘Eucalyptus’ 43
‘Razor Wire: Johannesburg 1990’ 45
Mark Mahemoff, ‘Greg’ 46
‘Some Nights’ 47
Peter Bakowski, ‘The Stuttering Boy’ 73
‘Lullaby of St. Kilda’ 73
‘Bondi Afternoons’ 74
‘In Praise of Movement’ 74
‘The Old Women of Bria Market, Central African Republic’ 75

ARTICLES
Lyn McCredden, ‘Mapping the Maternal: A Reading of Contemporary Australian Fiction and Society’ 22
Diana Brydon, ‘No (Wo)man is an Island: Rewriting Cross-Cultural Encounters within the Canadian Context’ 48
Nicholas Thomas, ‘Gender and the Politics of Tradition: Alan Duff’s Once were warriors’ 57
Gordon Collier, ‘Multicultural Self-Definition and Textual Strategy in the “Poetic” Prose of Derek Walcott: The Nobel Prize Speech’ 86
Glyne A. Griffith, ‘Veiled Politics in West Indian Criticism’ 104
David Moody, ‘The Tick of a Heretic; or, on Using the Poison of Theory in the Post-Colonial Operation’ 113
Lawrence Needham, ‘In Pursuit of Evanescence: Agha Shahid Ali’s A Nostalgist’s Map of America’ 123
Gilian Gorle, ‘Writing in English: Freedom or Frustration? Some Views from Papua New Guinea’ 128

INTERVIEWS
Elizabeth Jolley 37
I often cycled past the prawn farms with a friend on the way to school in the village where I was teaching. There were great ponds on acres and acres of land in the coastal village in this Eastern part of the island. On these lonely roads in their deep silence my awareness grew of the life that was evolving in these ponds as the crustacea emerged from the spawn, creating concentric ripples as they swam beneath the water’s surface. A subtle movement seemed to stir the expanse of water, breaking fragmented slivers of light, scattering them on the ponds. I was not able to observe these forms of life minutely but there was this feeling that the ponds were seething, alive, and that the prawns were trapped in their aquatic prisons from which they could not escape until they grew large enough to be caught, netted, packed and sent away to titillate the appetites of the wealthy gourmets who could afford them.

The great expanses of water reflected the stark white light of these arid regions, silvery mirrors that trapped the clouds, sky-reflecting. Light and dark changed the images that floated on the surface. At night, the moon, stirred by the wind, shivered fragmented like the segmented petals of a waterplant scattering irradiations of light. It was when the moon was dark that the prawn stealers came to the farms. They crept through the land in stealth, defying the guards, to net the prawns, even at the terrible cost of being caught, beaten up, even killed.

For me, the prawns appeared to have an even greater price than that placed on human life. They were being reared for profit. Foreign investors had put a great deal of money into this venture and the prawn farms had to yield a good harvest. The crustacea had first to grow, after which their globules of luscious flesh were carefully packed for export abroad. Sometimes the horrible image of death appeared in my mind, the opaque covering on the prawns, like the polythene shrouds which hid the remains of those killed in battle, or in land mine explosions. Those who ate them would not have such disturbing reflections.

The process took time. The prawn ponds were carefully tended. First, the spawn was put in and from the fertilized eggs, the nauplius emerged from its larval metamorphosis to that of the protozoa. The protozoa developed their antennae and eyes and thoracic limbs, all the while growing and multiplying in their aquatic environments, keeping the workers on the farms fully occupied.
The prawn farms provided employment for the villagers, many of them young boys. There were the older, familial men, too, who worked there. The tending of the prawn ponds, the netting, and packaging for sending abroad were the tasks that engaged them. Before the prawn farms were begun, the villagers cultivated their paddy fields and cleared the jungle for their chenas. They had herds of cattle and buffalo which they milked to fill their curd pots. At night the animals would be driven into the jungle and then herded out the next morning.

But the jungles had changed now. This territory was ravaged with fighting between the guerrillas and the security forces. But so was territory elsewhere too. It was always the innocent villagers who came under attack. The jungles became a place where they would seek shelter, fleeing from massacres or reprisals. This happened with all the communities that were embroiled in these violent events. The villagers would carry their few precious possessions with them and find refuge deep within the jungle even at the risk of being attacked by wild beasts or stung by snakes. Many of them died of snake bite but they still fled there at night. There were the sudden attacks, the brutal massacres, huts that went up in flames, the devastation of human habitations where the land was soon overtaken by the thrusting growth of the jungle while the people, displaced, had to move from refuge to refuge, from village to jungle to camps. Within the jungle there existed other networks of communication too. This was where the guerrillas operated from. They had their underground hospitals and storehouses for arms, ammunition, food.

Among the villagers, who in the midst of violence carried on their peace-time occupations and worked on the prawn farms, there were others who had no employment. The prawn ponds were a great temptation to them. Not that it would have mattered if a few prawns had been taken, whether to be sold or eaten by the villagers; yet every prawn in these ponds seemed to have a price on it. For these acres, which had once belonged to no one, were now in the hands of the foreign investors, those nameless people whose presence was only felt as a power that existed beyond this coastal village. It was now private property, enclosed and fenced in. No trespassers, and the trespassers would be the villagers themselves, were allowed in. But there was interference from certain other groups that had interests in this territory. Certain of the guerrillas operated in this vicinity. Not only were the different guerrilla groups waging war with the State troops, but they were in conflict with each other too. On the one hand the guerrillas had their advantages, on the other they were disadvantaged. They lacked air power, but they could depend on their knowledge of the terrain, their being part of the community and their ability, with a small band of fighters to contain a large number of their enemy. But their tactics also involved the civilians who were often caught in the cross fire. The guerrillas managed to slip away, vanish into thin air as it were, while the villagers were caught, rounded up and made to pay the penalty.
On several occasions, one particular guerrilla group would break into the prawn farms. It became a nuisance and an inconvenience to the foreign investors. All they were concerned about were their profits, not the political ideologies of a particular group. They wanted their prawn farms protected from any marauder, it did not matter who.

One of the most powerful guerrilla groups offered protection. Their offer was accepted and a large sum of money was paid which went to their cause. They would protect the prawn ponds and prevent the prawns from being stolen. This guerrilla group was very efficient at its job but they had to be ruthless when it came to keeping out the prawn stealers, even if they were their own people, the people from the village. As I reiterate, they were very conscientious at their job. They mounted guard at night but this did nothing to deter the villagers who came in by stealth. One of them was caught and warned. He came again. This time he was beaten up severely. The final time arrived when he was caught yet again. This time he was killed. The victim’s wife wrote to the Army Command complaining that there were terrorists operating on the prawn farms and that they had killed her husband. Because of this it was now only a matter of time before the State troops would move in with their commando units. This was a war situation. The policies on both sides allowed for no compromise. If any terrorist was caught he would be given short shrift. There would be no give and take. On either side, extermination would take place. Where the guerrilla was concerned, this often constituted a problem. They moved freely among the people. They did not always wear uniforms. This meant that any young or even middle-aged male was suspect.

Often the foreign investors were seen with their uniformed guerrilla guards, posing for photographs. No one could be absolutely certain whether they had any political interests in these areas. They simply came and went. They pursued their other lives. The guerrillas remained. So did the villagers. In a situation as volatile as this, there is room for underhand goings-on. Collaborators, quislings, informers and traitors, those hooded people will always be there. Sometimes through fear, sometimes through compulsion, sometimes for thirty pieces of silver. The traitors, too, if they are caught, are made to pay with their lives. There are ‘kangaroo courts’, summary executions, lamp post killings.

Yet another man who was in the habit of stealing prawns was caught by the guerrilla group. He was a strong, fearless man. The guerrillas beat him up badly. He warned them and said, ‘Finish me off now because if I escape I will revenge myself on you.’ But they did not kill him. They bound him up tightly and left him in a room. Meanwhile they relaxed in that man’s house and watched television. There appears to be a certain naivety in their actions, a naivety which lay in their confidence in their own power. The man managed to free himself and crawl out into the dark, carrying information to the army headquarters. Everything led to a confrontation with the guerrillas at the prawn farm.
And where did I fit in? I am an innocent man. I was the school teacher in the village and I was respected by all the people. Not only am I not a killer, but also I stay out of trouble. I play safe. But do not be mistaken. I am not a weak man. I am very strong inside. I can look after myself too, handle firearms. I learnt how to use a gun from my father who was a farmer. He had to protect his crops from marauding animals. I know how to handle an AK-47 too, although I have not yet learned how to handle the more sophisticated weapons. I am very particular about my appearance too. I always take pains to appear clean and tidy, so that the people may always have a good impression of me. I do not want anyone to think that I am a terrorist, or a militant, or a guerrilla or one of 'the Boys'. The image I always wanted to project is that of an innocent man. My face is clean shaven. My cheeks smooth. My clothes are always immaculate. I dress in spotless white clothes, freshly washed and ironed, white veshti, white shirt of crisp white cotton. I am careful not to show hostility or aggression towards anyone and I have practised, through yogic exercises, the sending out of friendly rays from my inner being so as to counter any hostility towards me. I sometimes think I see a radiance surrounding myself. I feel I am wrapped in a shining, protective light. I am protected from all evil forces that threaten me. I have a great sense of responsibility towards the children I teach, both boys and girls, and I do a lot of social service among the people too. I record the songs of the old men on my cassette tape so that they will be remembered for all time even though it is ironic that a man's life span cannot be predicted. No, especially not in these times.

My life goes on, day in, day out, at its usual, regular pace, for I allow very little to disturb me. Every day, I cycle past the mangroves on the road to my school. The mangroves flourish and grow dense and dark, a thick screen of leaves and succulent stems swollen with water. Their aerial roots grow and spread above the surface of the lagoon as if struggling to reach the light and breathe the air. A wild tangle of thick, rope-like roots trap the sediment that flows from the water. The roots stand out of the stiff mud banks like fortress walls. Colonies of trees grow out of these embankments. Symbiotic forms of life thrive in this environment. Tiny fish and molluscs thickly seed the water. Small armoured steel-grey crabs scuttle about in the rich mud. And in turn, all these forms of life are prey to water snakes and iguanas. The landscape will never change on these lonely roads but people have begun to change. Sometimes, need impels a man to risk his life to carry away the prawns in stealth from the ponds, prawns which he used to take freely from the lagoons in the past. No man is safe anywhere any longer, even in his own territory. Although I am an innocent man I too must learn that fear and danger can touch me as well. I must begin to prepare myself. Death lies within the jungle and outside of it too, anywhere, on the road or even in my classroom. Meeting death is not like meeting a friendly stranger.
Then the rains came. For twelve days it had rained continuously, drenching the earth. The vegetation sprang up fresh and green, the roads flowed with rivulets of muddy water. As the rains ceased I felt a change in the air, a change in my own life. The nights were clear and chill. Stars shone with a knife-sharp brilliance in the sky. But there was an ominous feeling that made my blood run cold in my veins. My ears were alert to stray rumours. The time was ideal for military operations to begin. There was news circulating in the air that supplies of diesel and petrol were being brought in. The grapevine buzzed.

On that particular day, that fateful day in my life, I woke up early, at four a.m. I was staying over in the school premises during that time. I went to the well to have my bath as was my habit. I heard the sound of helicopters in the air but I did not pay much heed at that moment. Suddenly a pick-up appeared, driving at furious speed towards the village where the prawn farm was. The alarm had been given that the attack was to take place there this morning. There were guerrillas in the pick-up. They were armed.

The sound of the helicopters grew louder, a curious chugging sound which increased as they came nearer. I stood at the well, watching skywards with the water still streaming down my body. The helicopters were flying low. This was unusual. Then I saw them preparing to land on the vacant site which was the playground of the school. Men in camouflage uniform were disembarking from the helicopters. Some of the guerrillas had jumped off the pick-up. They had taken cover beside the school buildings. At that moment the guerrillas started shooting – they were just three or four young men. The men from the helicopters began to return fire. One of the guerrillas climbed a tree and took sniper shots at the men. I stood petrified. I couldn’t move. The folds of my thin veshti were wet and clinging to my loins. I felt myself apart from all that was taking place. Detached, because I was not part of what was going on, uninvolved, yet, by virtue of being a spectator, in some way involved. I could feel everything that was happening move within my body, my limbs. Fear laid a lash on my tongue. I could not even cry out. The dawn had suddenly darkened.

The sniper on the tree had the advantage. Three officers fell. Another of their men too. And one of the drohi. The commando unit had been taken completely unawares. I stared death in the face. Everything around me was caught in a thrall of silence. The pick-up drove away with the guerrillas. They laid a mine on the way to the farm. A truck with the security forces was following the helicopter trail. Suddenly there was a tremendous sound, a reverberating explosion as the mine exploded. The truck with the men was blown to bits. I heard later that ten men had lost their lives. Others had reached the farm before the mine was laid. The fighting then began. The sounds of shooting, blasting, explosions travelled through the flat terrain of the countryside. There was bitter fighting between the forces
and the guerrillas who defended the place. What, or whom were they def-

defending? The vested interests of the foreigners or their own position? But
the guerrillas never remain long in a vulnerable position. They don’t get
caught. They slip away. They vanish. There are always others who invari-
ably suffer in the crossfire. The foreign investor was out of the country at
this time. He was safe. But the matter did not end there once the guerrillas
had escaped and the battle had abated. The others who were left, the un-
armed, were rounded up. All the males above the age of fifteen, ranging
from forty to fifty men, were lined up and shot. The rest were taken be-
hind a temple and clubbed to death. Eighty-seven of them died. One ex-
pects no mercy during these times. One shows no mercy either. There is
a war on. An unending war. These are the consequences of war. As I said
before, it is the civilians who suffer, especially the males. They are all
suspected terrorists. Many were rounded up from the cluster of eleven
villages too and killed. The wind travelled towards the villages bearing
the odour of blood. Later on a tractor was seen being driven towards the
farm to take the bodies for mass burial. The roads were clogged with mud
and this impeded the operation. It was a time of crisis and as they had
done before, the villagers, with a mat, a pot of water, some food and a few
of their precious belongings, took refuge in the jungles at night. In spite
of the snakes and death from their venom, they preferred this uncertain
safety.

But what about myself and my responsibilities towards my children? I
dried my body and put on my clothes. I waited for my students to arrive.
At about 6.30 the children came running to the school. It was very early,
too early for lessons to begin, but they were searching for a safe place,
away from the shooting. I put them into two classrooms – the school
buildings were in different blocks – and shut the doors. I tried to lock
them but the locks wouldn’t work. I tried to calm them. ‘Don’t move,’ I
said. They were in a state of terror with the sound of the shots and
explosions blasting the air. They would be safe here for the moment. The
messages will come later. Messages that are always brought by the
women. They go from place to place on their secret missions, searching for
food, searching for bodies. They also search for their sons; they wait by
the camps to get a glimpse of them peering through a grill or a half shut
door. They wait, they are patient. And then they came, just as I expected
– the grandmothers, at about 1.30 in the afternoon, in search of their
grandchildren, anxious because they had not returned home for the mid-
day meal. The battle had been raging and the sound of shots had warned
the villagers of the attack. Now the search operations would continue. The
helicopters were flying over the school; bullets were whizzing all over the
place. The grandmothers stood petrified, like logs; they couldn’t move.
The children could not be kept inside anymore. They came running out
to meet the grandmothers. The helicopters flew low and splattered the
building haphazardly with bullets. Two bullets whizzed past the children.
No one was hit or wounded here. The children looked up fearfully at the bullets that were being sprayed from the helicopters. They didn’t dare run for shelter back to the buildings so they cowered beside the walls. When the shooting ceased they were led away, back to their homes. I remained behind.

When there is trouble the boutiques and shops put up their shutters. I was able to get only a packet of biscuits from a boutique close by. I had no other food. I waited in the school. I didn’t want to move out. I closed the door behind me and watched through a keyhole. I heard the tramp of boots, the sound of voices. I saw the soldiers walking past, peering into the school premises. They were watchful, alert. They came to the gate. I was afraid that they would open it and walk in, but the buildings looked empty, silent, abandoned. If they had come inside and found me I would have been suspected of being a terrorist. There would be no time to answer questions. I would have been shot.

It seemed hours to me. I was kneeling by the door, I could see them passing. My state of mind was such that I imagined they could see me. But it was only I who could see them. They moved past and away. I began to breathe again after they had left but I knew that it would not end there. The mopping-up operations were on. The existence of the school teacher was known and the next day a woman came to the school bringing a message that I was summoned to the army headquarters. I had to go, but I was afraid, afraid more than anything else of interrogation. The interrogators were very skilled at their task. Clever. They were trained for this. I had only one hope. I told the woman to carry a message for me. I had a friend, the Superintendent of Police. He was a man from the south. We often met and spoke. We could communicate in English and Sinhala. I had only him to rely on. He would know that I was an innocent man. But I was innocent only because I did not carry firearms. Whoever has witnessed death as I have seen it, men falling, hit by bullets, dying under a clear sky, not knowing sometimes from what direction they were fired upon, could not think himself to be innocent. Nor could I do anything about the killings on either side. It made me feel a sense of guilt as if I were a participant in all that happened. I had knowledge. I was a witness. That alone would remove my innocence.

I could no longer ride my bicycle along the roads past the prawn farms intent on the great ponds with their water mirrors reflecting clouds, stirred by the swimming of the crustaceans beneath their surface. What was the use of hiding away in the jungle, there were worse risks there – the helicopters could spot you, or the snakes that were in the thickets could sting you. The STF also had armoured vehicles that go through the jungle. I preferred to stay outside the jungle. I was no terrorist. I did not like to listen to the stories that the guerrillas came and told me about their exploits. Killing was nothing to boast of, but people had lost their humanity, so they boasted. I was as yet not guilty of taking human life. Perhaps
here then, only here, was preserved what was left of the innocence I once had.

I had to answer the summons to go to the army headquarters but, as I say, there was fear and trepidation in my heart. The road was lonely, not a single other person walked along it except for myself and the woman who brought the message to me. My shadow appeared to extend and diminish, extend and diminish. At moments I even lost consciousness of its shape and form. My ears were buzzing as if voices, confused voices, intermingled with the whirring insect sounds that emerged from the jungle, had penetrated through those channels. The interrogation had already begun in my mind. I was rehearsing the questions I would be asked, interrogating myself. It was a preparation for what I would have to face. I reached the kadé. The soldiers were standing around with their guns. Their expressions changed when they saw me. Their faces were hostile. I was on the other side as far as they were concerned, a terrorist. I looked closely at their faces to see whether I could recognise any of them. My students used to describe them to me, faces without names, yet, by studying their expressions you could sometimes discern what their natures might be – their faces were young, as young as those of my students, but we looked at each other across tremendous, insurmountable barriers. One face struck me. It belonged to a short, squat looking soldier. He had a look of aggression on his face. He watched me warily. I would have to be careful of him. These men must have wondered, silently thinking their own thoughts about me. I felt I could read their minds.

‘He is one of them. How did he escape? These terrorists are elusive. He must have slipped out of our hands. They vanish, then they appear. They lay mines. They take sniper shots at our men. How did he alone escape from the prawn farm?’

I felt fear psychosis assail me. I tried to calm myself, control the trembling in my hands. I was helped by the fact that I had practised yoga. From my inner consciousness I was sending out friendly rays, but the hostile expressions did not change. I tried to still the thudding of my heart. It sounded thunderous in my own ears. If they were to place a hand against my heart they could feel its rapid beat. This was a way they had of testing you, testing to see whether you were a terrorist. I was afraid of two things, one of being interrogated, the other of being shot. I tried sending out rays of friendliness towards the interrogators. I always wanted to have good thoughts towards everybody. I did not want anyone to feel that I was a terrorist. But at this very moment when I was fearing for my life a police jeep drew up. My friend the police inspector was in it. I felt as if I were scooping out a hollow in the desert and had discovered water to quench my thirst. The relief I felt was like the discovery of an oasis. I bathed my face in this sense of comfort. It felt like cool water against my parched lips and throat. The inspector greeted me in a friendly manner, ‘Ah, Das, what are you doing here? Where have you been all this time?’
I was still very conscious of the expressions of the soldiers around me. Now they began to change, ever so slightly, like the breeze that shifted lightly, rippling the surface of the prawn ponds. Like the ripples starting in their concentric circles and growing wider with the movement of the crustacea beneath the water. Thoughts began to flicker across their faces. But there was still silence now that the gun shots had ceased. No one would come to net the prawns for a long time now and they would grow and procreate in their underwater world undisturbed by any marauders. They would crowd and jostle against each other as their numbers grew and soon, perhaps, they too would begin to war against one another and turn cannibalistic as the space that contained them became smaller. Then, too, the prawn ponds would begin to smell of death like the landscape around them. Death has an odour and the wind carries it in waves from village to village. It is not easy to move these bodies that lie strewn about because the roads are clogged with mud after the recent rains. The flies must be buzzing about them. The guerrillas have slipped away, vanished into the jungle, disappeared along the pathways and tracks that only they are aware of. And we do not know how long it takes for some to die; death does not always happen instantly. But it is only a matter of time and the women will go. They will follow perhaps the odour of death and find the bodies, identify them, carry the news back, the death couriers.

'Look, I'll try to get you transport in one of the helicopters but at the moment it is difficult. I had hardly sitting space myself,' said my friend the police inspector.

He drove off and I realised that I would have to go and wait in the camp. I had to be patient. It would take time. The press and TV crews were using the helicopters and the search operations were still continuing. I had to have faith in my friend. I was a survivor in the eyes of the others. A survivor and a terrorist. How had I managed to escape was the thought uppermost in their minds. I was still not safe.

In the camp the soldiers were young boys, even younger than myself. They were like my students. I did not want them to be the first to begin asking me questions. I preferred to be the one to ask them the questions. We got into conversation. The soldiers were curious but wary. They wanted to know about the massacre on the prawn farm. They wanted to know how much I knew, how many deaths had taken place. They knew how many of their own men had been killed preparatory to the operation. They asked me how many had been blasted in the land mine explosion. I could not tell them all I knew. My safety lay in concealment. I had to pretend that I did not know too much. I did not tell them the exact number of the dead. I said that only a few had died, five or six. I concealed myself like a wily prawn that went deep into the pond to escape being netted, settling itself in the silt, not letting its antennae appear above the surface of the water. I felt myself metamorphose into one of those crusta-
I was an innocent man. My hands had never tied the fuse wires in a land mine, nor did I boast like the others of the killings that were so easily performed. They were death searchers, who moved in and out of jungles hopping like jungle ticks from one pelt to another, following blood trails. Now, even here in this camp, I felt I had to create my own prawn pond, change my shape and form until it was safe to assume my human lineaments again. I had learnt much from those bicycle rides on those lonely roads. I was careful not to create enemies. I moved like a tiny land crab scuttling about the mangroves, cautiously, so that no bird would swoop down on me from the air. The soldiers were not sure of me at all. Even at this point they would keep me back for interrogation. They were very skilled in this art. I could perhaps not match their subtlety. I was still in a very delicate position. No one knew who I really was. And the other prisoners might think me an informer, a traitor, one of the drohis.

‘How many died at the prawn farm?’ the young soldiers asked.

‘Only about five or six,’ I answered. They must not know how much I knew.

‘We feel sorry for the poor people who died,’ they said. ‘But how are we to know who is a terrorist and who isn’t?’ said another. ‘They mingle with the people, with the civilians, and we cannot question each one of them individually. It is either them or ourselves. But in war who has time for pity? We see our men blown up in landmines. The flesh has to be scraped off the Claymores. They are shot by snipers. Reprisals and massacres take place – are these happenings not inevitable in a time of war? Killings will go on. The civilians will always suffer. They have to bear the brunt of the killings. Sometimes they, too, are caught in a situation from which they cannot escape. They cannot betray their own boys. They are caught in the crossfire. If they inform against their own kind they will be called drohi and they will have to die, tried in the kangaroo courts, tied to lamp posts and shot. If there is a landmine explosion the security forces have to search for the guerrillas, but who can get hold of a guerrilla? He knows the terrain so much better than we do and he can disappear. So it’s the civilian who is left – any male above a certain age is suspect, so they must pay. Death comes out of the jungle, it happens on the open road. Are we not all expecting death at any moment?’

Questions for which I have to find my own answers torture my mind. This is a time of war. Of course we have become used to the new conditions. Each man has his pre-arranged role to play. When the guerrillas ask the villagers to provide food for them, they do it. After all, the guerrillas do not have time to till the soil or gather harvests. In turn they protect the villagers in whatever way they can with their arms, play their own role. The women have to search for food. They move freely about on the roads so they can bring back news or carry news. Then there are those, the men,
I Am an Innocent Man

who use their own weapons. One does not always find loyalty. There is plenty of betrayal too. Betrayal means arrest, torture and death. Those who betray are also terrorists. And if you, in these circumstances, cannot speak the truth, aren't you betraying yourself too? And is it worth paying the price for safety when you see so many others dying on both sides, often people who are unable to defend themselves? Yes, on all sides. Among all communities. Children who have lost their parents. Parents who have lost their children, husbands their wives and wives their husbands. They have no homes. They have no hope. They are haunted by the sights they have witnessed.

In the past the villagers used the jungle for their cultivation. They still do. They cut down the trees, they clear the land, burn the scrub and plant their chillies and vegetables and grains. They set up watch huts to protect their crops from the animals, wild boar and elephant. In the past those were the only marauders. Their herds of cattle were driven into the jungle at night. In the mornings they came out for a milking. The milk was made into curd – there was time for it to settle and grow firm. Now, often, the everyday things of life cannot go on – there are curfews that disrupt life and people have often to abandon their homes. Now humans herd themselves in the jungles. There are deadly poisonous reptiles in the thickets. Perhaps the villagers prefer to have at least this choice, to choose the freedom to die in whichever way they want. I did not join the villagers who called me to spend the nights in the jungle. I preferred to remain in a silent and deserted schoolroom. I did not know how much longer I, too, could remain safe. Killing is now a legitimate pastime. At any time, at any point in the road, a land mine could explode. A party of villagers might be travelling in a vehicle, a bus, truck, lorry, van, and they can be blown to smithereens. Not only men, not only army personnel, but women and children too. They may have been going to market to buy their provisions. A bomb goes off in a bus. People, often innocent people, are dragged out of buses and shot. Massacres, reprisals, horror and violence. Men open fire on those who are praying in mosques. Villages go up in flames. Where do they take refuge? In mosques, in churches, in temples and refugee camps. And so it goes on, on all sides, among all communities. No mercy, no pity is shown on any side. And I myself, did I go up to those who had fallen when they got out of their helicopter, touch a still warm brow and utter one word of comfort? I thought I had no enemy. Then whom did I call my friend?

We are all trapped in our different camps. We have to devise our own weapons for protection if we do not carry them. AK-47s or T-56s or grenades. The silent men are trapped in their hoods. Their thoughts, too, are bitter if they have lost kith or kin. Or they might do it through simple greed. I feel pity for the young soldiers who remind me of the students I teach. They wear the sacred thread on their wrists for protection. Their faces are often bland, smooth. They, who should have expectations of life,
can only have expectations of death. Their hands clasp the guns strongly. That weapon is, after all, their life. We have to deceive ourselves over and over again for what we do. I could do nothing to stop the killings of those officers or the soldiers or the informer when they got off that helicopter. Am I guilty then too? I was safe. The guerrillas would not harm me but I cannot say that I had nothing to do with those deaths. They were taken unawares with no chance of defending themselves. True, they shot back, but at whom? At an unseen enemy. My prior knowledge of what was to take place did not stop me from being silent. I witnessed the panorama of death. Where did I belong? My life had become like one of those ancient epic plays, but I was only the observer. I was no hero. Would the rest of my life be like this because I wanted to protect my innocence? Was I not already besmirched and defiled by being the witness to violence and death?

I wait in the camp until I get a seat in the helicopter that will take me back to Kallady. The plane, when I got in, I observed, was navigated by a foreign pilot. He turned his face away from me. I saw another mercenary too, tall, strong, armed to the teeth. I recognised the countries they belonged to but I kept silent. This was no time for familiarity, for asking questions. In time our own people will also carry arms to other countries to fight for other causes. We accept this fact of history. Identity does not count for a mercenary. He chooses to put it aside, even lose it when he fights for a cause that has no meaning for him.

In the helicopter I was tense all the time. I was flanked by soldiers on either side. A childish thought came to my mind. What if I were secretly pushed out so there would be no more trace of me? After all I had been through, was this a game I played with myself to release the fears and pressures that had built up within me?

I was taken back to Kallady camp and interrogated there. They wanted to know all the details of what had taken place, about those violent deaths, the number of deaths, about how much I knew.

'Ve want to know the truth about how many died.'

Again I had to pretend that I did not know. The truth, once it was out, would endanger my life. All I wanted was to go back to the people, the villagers, to live among them peacefully. I don’t want a lot of possessions or goods or wealth. I want to go back and teach in my village, listen to the songs of the old men as they clear their throats and begin to sing their folk songs. After they die who will remember these songs? The young have no time to learn them. There will be nothing to remember except the horrors of this eternal war that goes on, day after day after day. The people are tired, tired of war.

I will go back to my school. Place my fingers on the bullet holes that pit the walls. Look out on the field where I saw death. Remember. Perhaps in time, forget. But – an innocent man?
A THRENODY (from *Pasan*)

The children danced
the children hopped and screeched
and
pointed pointed as
the thing
swung
bobbed rocked as
the water
burbled solemnly, endlessly
sedulously murmuring
of peace, eternity, rainwashed sunshiny thickets
and green pastures and
sleepy hamlets;
it rocked,
the children pointed as
the thing
yawed and rocked and

doyi, doyi, doy, sleep my baby sleep,
bayi, bayi, bayi, bye my baby bye

rocked in slumbrous similitude of ease
all but

*kirimuttiya gangé-é giya*

but
the button, the wee nose, the
pretty, pretty johnny, the
tommy, the pretty
the pretty little
penis, bobbing in the eddies, and
the children hopped and pointed,
laughing, screeching, not seeing

there was no head any more
down in the river a pot goes floating by
over the waters the white cranes fly

Each new morn... – how not to Dalí
the horrors plopped casually
morning after morning – ... new widows howl,
new orphans ... about
the succulent landscapes and so-peaceful homesteads
of the Resplendent Maathrubhoomi, reality
overtakes the surreal, heaven
isn’t struck, does not resound
imagine

a head
the eyes, the eyeballs finely veined in delicate pink over
eggshell blue, in one corner, the left, a black clot with
an orange-red surround, jagged, wicked; the eyeballs out, pushed
out, globed, the pupils black black points in a brownblack circle
circled by the veined whites the blooded lids the ditchsockets
parted by half a nose above blubbery leaky lips over a most beauti­ful firm strong chin above
rags and tatters
white thongs and trails of skin hair veins
tangled and streaked above, above

nothing
imagine a head above imagine alltheabove
above nothing

move

two feet right, by the pool, our ornament, a
head above all the, yes, and
two more, yes, and
another three, yes yes and and
yes retch yes
gag yes

Remember
‘it is evil to forget’
the dismembered memberless gazes
stares, the screaming
of children as school-bus stalled
and stuttered, and in the pond
lotuses gazed gazed at the bluest sky
CHANDANI LOKUGÉ

A Pair of Birds

Raja found it finally, buried in the debris, lodged between the fallen rubble. He picked it up carefully, wiping it gently with his palm. Without its blue backdrop wall, against which it had been hanging for as long as he could remember, it had lost its colour. The flying white birds had lost their vibrance, they looked washed out, their fluid motion as they flew into the sky, did not seem quite life-like now. The picture was dirtied anyway. He was tired, washed out, like the pair of birds in the picture. He would sit down a moment. The air was full of human ashes and screams and cries. And lonely and silent.

Two children came up along the road, with dirty faces and ragged frocks. Seeing him, they passed on, turned in at the next burnt-down heap of house, and began, with hurried alert eyes, to look round. They had their dreams. Perhaps they would find beneath a brick or stone, a thali, or a bangle. How wonderful that would be.

‘There’s nothing at all here,’ said the elder child. ‘Someone has already beaten us to it.’

They stood together forlornly, it was the last probable treasure store down the lane, except for the charred ruins on which this tiresome man sat. They stared at him. Would he move? Perhaps he would not mind, if they searched the area.

‘Look around this place. You might find something. See, I found this,’ he said to them, ‘You might be luckier.’

They came up to him warily. He did not seem to be from the police. They took the picture from him and looked at it.

‘Of what use is this old burned picture?’ they scoffed, gaining confidence.

‘You can’t sell it or anything. Not like finding a brass vase or a gold ring. Like Sunil’s loot. He’s rich now, he sold the thali to the mudalali, and he has enough money to get married with.’

‘Who is Sunil?’

‘Our brother. He was collecting money to get married, for as long as I can remember. He’s the scavenging man, who pushes the garbage cart down this road. It does not pay, you see.’ The child finished maturely.

He wished the children would go away now and leave him alone. Making hay while the sun shines, he thought. Buried passions surged within. The children moved away, and with a stick began to dig among
the charred remains of his house. He picked up a heavy stone, if he threw it now, at them, at least one would be hurt. At what part of which body could he aim it? The head, or the leg? Either way, the child would cry out in pain, in horror, there would be blood oozing out of another body, another cry would pierce the evening quiet. He stood up, lifting the stone over his shoulder, poised to throw it. There was a singing in his ears, he heard the shouts, the screams, his mother and his sister, dragged out of the house by their father, the men with their crowbars and sticks, mad­dened faces and shining sweat-covered bodies in the darkness. And then the splintering glass, the blood gushing out of his father’s head, where they had struck him, the burning, the fire eating in, spreading into the bedrooms, to his books, enveloping all. The two children had turned, they were gazing at him innocently.

‘There’s nothing here, Sir,’ they said, ‘We are going home.’

He dropped the stone. And sat down again. Drained out, empty. He shook himself, he had come here to think. Not to relive the past. What was there of the past anyway? His father was dead, his mother and sister in the refugee camp. He had to plan, as the head of his family now, he had to plan, settle things for his mother and sister. Where could he start? Menik wanted them to come and stay with her family. But in her kind offer he saw only patronising condescension. He visualised his mother and sister, sitting hidden away in a back room somewhere, eating off the left-overs in the house. He was only working himself up again. He tried to calm down, and dropped his head in his hands. He was being unnecessarily cruel now, he admonished himself, he knew Menik, she only wanted to help. So many of their other Sinhalese friends wanted to help. Lal, Maithri, they had been with him round the clock, after they had heard of or seen the tragedy. He had been abrupt, cold and unfriendly. Perhaps he had hurt them, cut them off altogether. He could not help it. He wondered if he had been foolish. Perhaps he should have accepted their help. He was really helpless. They had just this ten thousand rupees in the bank, and his sister’s dowry, awaiting her marriage. He could not touch that, it was a sacred fund. And he had his job. They could seek political asylum in England or France, he thought.

He stood up and wandered on, down the road to Maithri’s house. He felt embarrassed, were they on two sides now? But Maithri had offered his house to his family during the riots and they had been friends for nearly ten years, classmates, neighbours... and had Maithri’s father not been working in Jaffna, he was sure, the destruction of his house would never have taken place. He remembered suddenly, with a flash of gratitude how Mr. Seneviratne had taken special care of them in the last riots of ‘81. Well, it was worth a try anyway, it might ease the misery in his heart, if he could communicate it to Maithri. Share it with him.
Maithri stood by the gate of his home. He looked around moodily – three houses down his lane, all of them saved in the last riots, because of his father, lay in ashes today. Our peaceful nation, he thought, our religious, beautiful people, how violent they were when it came to a national problem. He remembered having read somewhere about how the Sinhalese reacted violently to injustice – quick to anger, quick to forget. For the past how many years, had this ethnic problem been brewing beneath the surface? Yet, they had grown up, side by side, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, he and Raja. What had nationality to do with friendship? They had hidden three Tamils in their house during the past week, friends from the front house. Shanthi too. He wondered if their friendship could be love. He liked everything about her, the way she walked, the way she talked, the way her vivacious eyes met his, half shyly, half coquettishly when he spoke to her. But last week they had fled to Jaffna. Nothing remained for them here, the house lay in desolation, broken, half burnt walls and flapping windows, like the skeleton of some grotesque animal, exposed to sun and rain. He heard the postman’s bell. He leaned over the gate. But the postman did not stop at his house.

‘Nothing today, Sir,’ he smiled sympathetically and rode on.

Maithri felt, more than saw, his mother’s shadow move away from the window. From morning she had been hovering about the verandah waiting for the letter that failed to come. From his father in Jaffna. Was anything wrong, he wondered for the hundredth time, why was there not even a phone call? But perhaps the telephones were out of order in Jaffna. He had tried to call last evening but failed. Perhaps they should try sending across a police message tonight. But no news meant good news, he thought again. And his father must be very busy. He looked up and down the lane, restlessly.

Jaffna. What was Jaffna like today? His thoughts dwelt again inexorably on his father. Usually, he skirted this issue, and filled his mind with lesser things. But now. How was his father? His mother’s worried face made him want to avoid her, they were helpless here, they could do nothing but wait, wait for news that he was still alive, wait for news that he was shot dead. He remembered reluctantly, painfully, the argument that had taken place between his mother and father, the day his father brought home his transfer orders. He was to take command in Jaffna the next day. His mother had been so angry.

‘You have no right to go away to Jaffna. You have two children. They will have a dead father in a week, if you go. It is just a death trap, Jaffna, you said so yourself yesterday. See what happened to Wije and Gunadasa. Where are they now with their heroics? Dead. Ashes. And where are their families? Forgotten. You can’t afford to die for your country when you have a family. Of what use is a dead hero?’

‘Look Chitra, I am not trying to be a hero. It is important that you understand that. It is just that I am a police officer and I have a job to do.
How can I get the transfer cancelled at this moment. I have no choice in the matter at all. I am in the police, you know.'

'They will kill you, Lal, you know what the terrorists are. Tell Suren. He will get the transfer cancelled. There must be so many others who have not served in Jaffna yet. Who are free and unmarried, let them go.' But there had been no hesitation in his father's voice, no indecision when he said,

'It is out of the question, Chitra, you know it, let's not get hysterical about it, I'm not on some suicidal squad, and really not cut out to be a hero. And you can't forget my horoscope – I'm to live to be a good eighty years, remember? Nothing is going to happen to me.'

His father had not been joking. His voice was strained with the tensions of his work. Had he been trying to convince his mother or himself?

And when he had been taken away in the jeep, with his single suitcase of clothes, his last thoughts had been of them at home.

'Be very careful, don't go out at night, Maithri, look after your mother and sister. I leave you in charge. Just be careful, I will write to you as soon as I can.'

As the jeep turned the corner, he had looked back, and Maithri had been surprised, his father was not a sentimental person. He was afraid for his father. And filled with anger for these terrorists who created all this havoc in the country. 'Eelam' my foot, Maithri thought furiously, separatism, division, all words – we have to fight them, they must not break up our country.

'Let Shanthi go to hell,' he said aloud, angrily.

He did not see Raja until Raja stood in front of him. The two gates were closed. Raja stood just outside on the road. Maithri looked at his friend. He opened the gate.

'Hallo, come in Raja, I was thinking of something and didn't see you really.'

He smiled, his arm went around Raja in a familiar gesture. But Raja felt Maithri's effort. They had been friends too long for either to pretend anything. Yet, just now pretence was necessary, and so he smiled a smile he did not really feel.

'Sit down. Nangi, bring something for Raja to drink, he's looking hot and sweaty.'

His sister came in a few minutes later with a glass of fruit juice. She served it to him, smiling – she liked Raja, they were like brothers – Raja and aiya. She sat down on the arm of a chair.

'It must worry you that schools are still closed nangi. There isn't much time left for your exam now, is there?' Raja tried to make conversation. Examinations, he thought, it was a topic that was safe. Impersonal.
Just two months more. We have not even covered all the syllabuses yet, but it's not so important. We are all so worried about thatththa being in Jaffna,' she said wistfully. 'We have had no news from him for three days. Perhaps he has no way of sending a message across. Nothing in the post today too, aiya.'

'I know,' Maithri said.

They sat quietly. They had never been quiet like this in the past, Raja thought, they would all talk together, and Maithri's mother would sometimes admonish them, 'Make less noise, people will think there is a street brawl in the house.'

But they would not care. Now this silence, stretching, stretching, before them. Yawning into nothing.

'So, how are auntie Rose and Saku? You should have brought them here, Raja, they would have been safe with us, they could at least have eaten some good food.'

'Thank you. They are doing very well at the camp. At least, they are not feeding on scraps falling off someone's table.'

Raja's mouth was dry by the time he uttered the last word. He cringed, seeing the hurt gather in Maithri's sister's eyes.

'Maybe it's for the best, Nangi, I don't suppose thatththa is being treated kindly by those Tamils in Jaffna,' Maithri retorted, furiously.

They sat tongue-tied, staring at nothing. Confused. Uncertain of what next to say. Damn these Tigers.

'But Shanthi's family is in Jaffna too, isn't it? They will take care of him.'

Raja recommenced the conversation, with an effort.

'If the terrorists let them. If those devils find out that Shanthi and her family are helping a Sinhalese, they'll all be wiped out,' Maithri said.

'Was nothing left of your things? No books, nothing?' Maithri wished that his sister would shut up. But Raja did not seem to mind. He showed her the picture of the birds.

'This is all I could find. Maybe the looters were luckier.' He could not keep the bitterness from his voice.

'You are lucky your lives were saved,' Maithri cut in again. He could not help it. There was this anger in him. They had no business to sound like holy martyrs, he thought, it was their own people who started all this and someone had to pay the price. Why should it be his father? Better the Tamils themselves, and Raja was a Tamil. Maybe in his secret heart he was himself a Tiger, or wishing that he was one.

'You would not say that, had you seen everything going up in flames that night. Or were you with the mob yourself? I did not know that your sympathies were with them,' exclaimed Raja. He gripped the arms of his chair. What was the meaning of this? They were arguing, weren't they? So they were now irrevocably on either side of the dividing line. The Tamils and the Sinhalese. Doesn't he care that my mother and sister are starving, homeless in the camp?
How can Raja forget, Maithri wondered, very hurt, how he had begged of him to bring his family to this house.

They were both angry and full of resentment.

‘Come, now,’ Nangi said. ‘What is the matter with the two of you? You can’t settle the country’s problems, don’t be idiotic. You’ll be hitting each other in a minute.’

She went away into the house. She was getting a little tired of it all. But she could not blame anyone. Could she?

Maithri’s mother came towards them a few minutes later. She carried a basket covered with paper.

‘I have prepared some food for Rose and Sakuntala, Raja. You can take it along with you to the camp when you leave.’

She sat down sighing, trying to think of something to say. She felt the tension in the air. But her thoughts returned to what was uppermost in her mind.

‘I don’t know when these problems will settle down, I was listening to the news just now, there is a forty-two hour curfew imposed in Jaffna commencing at noon today. Thaththa must be in such danger...’ Her voice trailed away. She gazed into the distance. Raja stood up.

‘Thank you for the food, auntie,’ he said taking the basket, ‘it is kind of you to have bothered.’

‘Tell Rose and Saku that I will come to see them soon,’ she tried to smile.

‘It’s just that I am so worried about Lal.’

‘Of course, I’m sure they will understand. Don’t worry about it.’

Raja moved towards the door. He glanced at Maithri. Maithri stood up with an effort.

‘I’ll just go up the lane with Raja,’ he said to his mother.

‘Come right back,’ she admonished quietly.

They walked together up the lane.

‘Smoke?’ Maithri offered his half-smoked cigarette to Raja.

‘Sorry, machang. It’s thaththa being away that keeps getting us down.’

He tried clumsily to make it up.

Raja was silent. They were passing his house.

‘I think of your father too, had he been here, my house would have been safe. We keep thinking about that, back in the camp. He is a good man, your father. When did we ever argue about nationality before this. It is just this... Let’s forget it. What can you and I do anyway, from here.’

Maithri saw Raja to the bus.

‘Don’t come this way tomorrow. It is not safe to wander around by yourself. I will bring something for your people to the camp.’

Raja did not reply immediately.

‘Thanks,’ he said, at last, trying to sound grateful. Maithri watched the bus out of sight. Then sticking his hands in his pockets he moved away.

As he neared his house, he saw the police car parked by the gate and the small group of people gathered by it. He stopped walking and stood
rooted to the gravel. He bit his lip desperately. He saw his sister extricate herself from the clutching hands of friends. She came running towards him. She stopped before him. He drew her to him and held her tightly. He looked beyond the gate. He saw his mother walk into the house surrounded by neighbours.

'A land mine,' his sister sobbed.
LYN McCREDDEN

Mapping the Maternal: A Reading of Contemporary Australian Fiction and Society

A recent memorandum received in my workplace, an Australian academic department, was headed ‘Presence of Young Children in University Buildings during Working Hours’. Its content and tone were disturbing to a number of staff members (though certainly not to all). In its ‘Health and Safety’ bureaucratese, it expressed concern for the welfare of young children, some of whom had been ‘come across ... riding alone in the lifts, playing on the stairwells or running in and out of the buildings’. Concern over the disruption to staff members and to the University legally, was expressed in a deeply condescending and repressive note of instruction. It was addressed to parents (via their heads of department), on the conduct of their parenting: ‘school holidays, public holidays and curriculum days are all known well in advance and appropriate arrangements for the care of children can be made for such periods... Unsupervised activities...leave children exposed to accident, injury and even assault...’

How far have Australian or other Western democratic societies come, how far are they willing to come, in negotiation concerning child-rearing and the role of parents? My provisional answer, as a full-time mother and academic, is a gloomy one. While the above memo was directed to parents, and not just mothers, I would claim that what is so condescendingly being positioned is the role and practice of the maternal in a still rigidly polarized society. In Britain recently the letter pages of The Guardian have been full of renewed debate on the ‘Wages for Housework’ campaign. The core of the debate has been over the status of the campaigners, their status not amongst the general population but within the women’s movement. A range of writers asked whether these women, who argue the right to admit domestic and mothering work into the paid workforce, are the ‘loony fringe’ of the women’s movement, a ‘politically correct cult’ so idealistic it doesn’t realise the state of the nation? Their idealism, according to one correspondent claiming the title of ‘feminist’, has turned them into fascist watchdogs of feminism, unable to negotiate with the real world and critical of ‘career women’...
who work for pay: 'When I was active in the women’s liberation move-
ment in the eighties, no feminist group would have anything to do with
WFH. We believed they were funded by the CIA to infiltrate and destr
the movement, based on the number of feminist actions and cam
paigns they tried to take over, pick fights about, divert the politics of
and generally disrupt.' (The Guardian, 6/8/92, p.17, the 'Women' sec
tion). In a counter claim, two 'sisters' of WFH point out that the attack
by the 'Establishment' on WFH’s 'political correctness' is a 'fashionable
... way of descrueting those who oppose sexism, racism, homophobia,
discrimination against people with disabilities...'

In 1992 the media has carried harrowing images on the American
marches, sit-ins and brawls over abortion. And now the State in
Sweden, even Sweden, is reconsidering women’s rights to abortion. At
this time of deep economic recession and attendant high levels of un-
employment in many Western countries, the practical and metaphoric
space of the maternal – the domestic, the female body, child-rearing or
the decision not to bear children, the role of medicine and technology
in conception; or in more abstract terms, the abject, the other, the pre-
symbolic – is being ravaged, yet again. It is being ravaged institutio-
ally by the state, church, workplace, and concomitantly it is being con-
tested, often violently, between women, and between feminists.

In feminist theoretical debate on the maternal, and in the lived con-
sequences of following, or even believing in, various positions within
this debate, a number of painful contradictions and urgent issues have
recently emerged. In order to examine these contradictions, this essay
will take two approaches: it will outline a number of contemporary the-
etorical formulations of the maternal, and will trace the viability or
consequences of these ideas through examination of several literary and
political sites.

A constant theme of French psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia
Kristeva’s writing over the past decade has been with the maternal
linked to what she defines as the abject.1 Much has been written around
her notions of abjection, a psychic state by which the human subject is,
to varying degrees, shaped. Related in both time and space to the ‘pre-
symbolic’, that time before agency and language have emerged, the ab-
ject in its most violent emanations shapes the artist, the mad, and the
saintly. But in the highly metaphorical writing common to Kristeva, the
psychic state and the concrete object often blur. So, the broad and in-
visible psychic state of abjection is evoked through the most ordinary of
concrete bodily functions, excretions, oozings, tears, breast-milk, blood.
And with the same metaphorical slipperiness, abjection and the maternal
are intimately linked. In her recently translated work on depression and
melancholia, Black Sun,2 Kristeva is chiefly concerned with the causes
and the literary and psychic effects of these states. The paperback cover
of Black Sun is a poignant detail from Hans Holbein’s Portrait of the
Artist’s Wife, Elsbeth Binzenstock, and Her Two Children Philip and Catherine. The detail is of the child’s head only, caressed by the mother’s hand, as it stares upwards towards an invisible (for the viewer) maternal face. The child’s gaze is hard to interpret, being anything from awed to resigned. But it is the invisibility of the maternal body, apart from the equally unreadable hand about the child’s shoulder, that is the point. Drawing on the notion of depression which she interprets in Kant, Freud and Proust as a nostalgia, a memory event belonging to lost time, Kristeva writes:

I can thus discover antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something that I once loved. The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the deferment of the hatred or desire for ascendency that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me. My depression points to my not knowing how to lose – I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss.

Kristeva’s general discussion of depression is based on Freudian and Lacanian notions of the family drama, its Oedipal struggles, castrations and fears of castration. The loss she describes here is of course connected to specific, experienced losses, and it is also a general mourning, given archetypal status, even as it is applied to individual cases:

When I say that the object of my grief is less the village, the mother, or the lover that I miss here and now than the blurred representation that I keep and put together in the darkroom of what thus becomes my psychic tomb, this at once locates my ill-being in the imagination. A dweller in truncated time, the depressed person is necessarily a dweller in the imaginary realm. Such a linguistic and temporal phenomenology discloses, as I have often emphasized, an unfulfilled mourning for the maternal object.

For Kristeva such mourning is potently brewed of love and yearning, as well as hatred and dreams of domination. It is an extremely melancholic overview of the human subject – in particular the poet, the mad and the saintly – in relation to the maternal. It is one which Kristeva evidences again and again in her aptly named Black Sun, through case histories and through her discussion of artistic production, specifically the work of Holbein, Nerval, Dostoyevsky and Duras. The maternal is always a battleground, where relations to ‘the maternal object’ are already ambiguous and agonized, a desire simultaneously full of yearning and the rage to overcome.

Like Kristeva’s, Luce Irigaray’s texts tease the reader with a constant blurring of metaphoric and concrete:
The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the ‘dark continent’ par excellence. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell... And if there is now such a polarization over the questions of abortion and contraception, isn’t that one more way of avoiding the question: what of the imaginary and symbolic relationship with the mother, with the woman-mother? What of that woman outside her social and material role as reproducer of children, as nurse, as reproducer of labour power?

The maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need. Where desire is concerned, especially in its religious dimension, the role of maternal-feminine power is often nullified in the satisfying of individual and collective needs.

For some, Irigaray’s mix of universalizing apocalyptics and political application, her woman/women shuffle, is unsatisfactory. Like Kristeva, Irigaray takes great liberties with the registers of language, moving rapidly between high lyricism and particular, social application, between abstract and concrete, and between social, psychic realities and utopic exhortations. It is this utopianism which has been Irigaray’s hallmark, and it separates her finally from Kristeva’s very different, bleaker idea(lism)s. Kristeva’s work leans towards the bleak heroism of struggle with abjection, or melancholy, in order to produce the great thing: a life scarred and reconstructed, vision, great works of art. Irigaray, in her more flamboyant language, registers powerfully the disgust with which the maternal is written, spoken, lived, obliterated:

The womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman’s sex as a whole.

There are no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words. The corresponding affects will therefore be anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration.

But this deeply-imagined recess, the maternal, is also a symbolic site of psychic and social regeneration. Irigaray calls for – imagines – a rebirth for men and women, where the once omnipotent phallus is seen not as a Freudian, competitive rival, desiring to kill the father and take his place, but reconstructed – in language, in relationships – as ‘a desire to do away with the one who artificially cut the link with the mother in order to take over the creative power of all worlds, especially the female world ... no longer omnipotent it would, if it respected the life of the mother – of the mother in all women, of the woman in all mothers – reproduce the living bond with her.

It’s hard to see here just who this ‘one’ is who has attempted to usurp the power of all worlds, but it is clear that Irigaray is seeking to actively ameliorate, through displacement onto a grand symbolic field, the battle between men and women, women and women. Part of her work
is to find ways of healing, remaking, renarrativizing, the wounded relationship women bear towards other women, and towards their own biological reality, as child-bearer.

In the women's movement over the last two decades, in many of its parts, there has been a dispersed uneasiness, and in some quarters an ideological dogmatism regarding the role of woman as mother. For some, this debate has taken the form of acceptance of the role of women as child-bearers and carers, accompanied by political lobbying on issues of contraception, abortion, medical intervention, child care. The issue is raised in the context of lesbianism, sexual alternatives, and in discussions on women's careers and the work force. And repeatedly, in Western democracies, the debate seems to begin from the premise of individual choice. Often, this category of 'choice' reduces the debate to mutually exclusive alternatives for women's lives – motherhood/career/lesbianism – for feminists as much as for others. The call, by writers such as Helene Cixous, to attempt a surmounting of the dichotomous structures which infest Western thinking, seems to be growing more distant of late.

An example of such polarizing, from the British press: in a recent feature article on the work of Andalusian flamenco dancer Cristina Hoyos (the Olympic games opening and closing ceremonies) British journalist James Woodall revealingly describes her work for the 1992 Edinburgh festival:

Yerma, Hoyos's adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's tragedy ... is a powerful tale of a woman whose husband will not give her children, and will test the limits of both Hoyos herself as a dancer, and her medium... For Hoyos, who plays the lead role, the key is Yenna herself. 'Her obsession with maternity is the driving force. She is the true Andalusian woman, who understands the intricate connections between love and family.'

Married for 12 years, Hoyos has had no children herself. Her work has been her life; limited family commitments explain how she has kept physically and mentally in tune...

What is revealed here, most specifically, is the journalist's reliance on the cliches surrounding motherhood: 'her work has been her life', too many family commitments sap the physical and mental capacities. Mixed with these cliches, and feeding them, are the larger myths of motherhood which Hoyos (in this report at least) repeats: the husband 'gives' children to the woman, who is longing, even 'obsessed with maternity', as with any 'true' [Andalusian] woman. And laced through these myths are the contemporary fables: this artistic, energetic, strong woman has chosen career over children, and it is a noble choice. Look at the product. A woman with all her passion intact, able to give to art what 'family commitments' have not been allowed to sap away. She is 'Hoyos herself as a dancer.'
This polarizing of women’s roles, this turning of women’s lives into a battlefield of heroic choice, is a further part of the myth. It is a myth which many modern women, particularly in the decades after the contraceptive pill, have shared, even amongst themselves. I believe one of the greatest problems confronting the contemporary women’s movement is that being asked, or perhaps held back in strained silence. The question is not ‘Which direction do I choose?’ , but ‘Why am I being made to represent (and adopt) a woman’s life in such polarized terms?’ This question in turn may sound like the ultimate Western desire to have it all, to operate beyond ‘choice’, particularly in the light of many women’s enslaved lives. Perhaps it will be argued pragmatically that women do have to make excluding choices. Of course. But the question which needs to be asked is not about the individual options of privileged women, but the polarizing and polarized values which define the different functions women perform. Who, or what, is defining and perpetuating the separateness of the different spheres? Irigaray’s textual engendering does offer one way of thinking beyond the dichotomies. For some, her utopics may be far too universalizing, even sentimental, as they rewrite the mother in all women.

It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engage something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example... If it is not to become traumatizing or pathological, the question of whether or not to have children must be asked against the background of an other generating, of a creation of images and symbols... we must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. 9 It is clear that this passage, and I would argue Irigaray genererally, rhetorically blurs the polarities of woman as reproducer, producer and produced. But this blurring takes full, creative cognizance of the actual life questions of women, the often ‘traumatizing or pathological’ struggles women are faced with. She uses ambiguity deftly, some may say annoyingly, to skirt the category of choice. Women here do not choose to be or not to be mothers, they ‘are always mothers’. The word ‘mother’ is given its full range of possibilities, from potentially passive, biologically-determined position, to object of others’ production, to active generator of children, culture, change. This is a manifesto daring to set itself up in dissent with long social and cultural traditions, institutions and practices which would ‘once more kill the mother.’ It takes seriously, within a perhaps typically French intellectual context, the efficacy of cultural production – that ‘other generating...a creation of images and symbols’ – and dares to place it, not hierarchically above the maternal, but in a complex set of changing, able-to-be-changed relationships.
So the struggle is firmly placed in the realm of representation, in the lap of artists, to whom both Kristeva and Irigaray, like Freud before them, appeal for illustrative and generative example. Three recently published novels by Australian male authors – Mudrooroo’s *The Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and Peter Carey’s *The Tax Inspector* – prove to be revealingly confusing in their dealings with the maternal. While being wary of simplistic generalization, this female reader constantly registered unease at the violent ambivalence in both the imagery and the uses to which the maternal was put in each of these novels. Ambivalence is not of course a crime, but has been properly celebrated as an aesthetic mode, one which can work towards dissolving the straitjacket of dichotomous thinking discussed above. Yet I will be arguing here that in each of these three novels the ambivalent absence, withdrawal, failure or violence of the maternal figure, while often balanced thematically by the crimes of the paternal, forms a foundational crime or lack in the text. At what level of authorial intention such retribution of the maternal operates it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to say. But it is in the crucible of the most ambivalently-compressed passages, those written with a dynamic tension between the thematic and linguistic concerns of the novel, that the representations of the maternal emerge.

This is so for Mudrooroo’s important novel *The Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, where the figure of Mada (a representation of the pigeon-English pronunciation of ‘Mother’), the white missionary wife becomes the site of strange sympathies, desires and violence. Mada is, in the waking world of the novel, a sickly, embittered woman forced to play at being the female symbol of British civilization to the aboriginal tribe her husband, Fada, seeks to educate. All the while she loathes her situation, her husband and his religious/commercial mission, and the pitiful Aboriginal recipients of his mission. She relies on the irregular supply ships to bring the painkilling medicine with which she blots out the horrors around her. The novel opens with a complicated night ritual performed by the remnants of the tribe, cross-dressed in a calculated jumble of aboriginal and white costume, dancing a modified reel to the sound of clapsticks and didgeridoos. As they dance, the Shaman, Jangamuttuk, prepares to enter the place of ghost dreaming, the site of white power, in order to capture the essence of that power and bring it back to his dying people. Mada, trying to sleep in her hut, ‘writhed uneasily, then jerked awake as the burning pain hit her..down in her abdomen and twisted along her spasming bowels’ (5). So it is that Jangamuttuk makes his journey to the supposed place of power:

A ghost female lay on a platform covered with the softest of skins. She was fair to behold. Stark white and luminescent was her skin beneath which, pulsing blue with health, Jangamuttuk could see the richness of her blood. Her lips were
of the reddest ochre and her cheeks were rosy and glowing with good health. She slept the sleep of a being seemingly content in body and spirit, but Jangamuttuk with his insight knew that this was an illusion. A wave of ill-feeling from her nightmare shivered her form and before his eyes the fair illusion of her face twisted with a hunger which might never be satisfied ... her hunger erupted in a scream of rage at the human. The female sprang at him. Before the claws could fasten on his throat, he regained his power and sprang aside... (15)

It is strange and disturbing, this image of colonial power and confrontation represented in terms of maternal and paternal warfare. The female Mada figure, keeper of the golden flask, ‘the source of her good health’, is overwhelmingly contradictory: guardian of the secret health and a nightmare-wracked illusion; a seductive, soft-skinned woman lying prone, and a harpie, clawed and violent; victim and perpetrator. Jangamuttuk here is the aboriginal agent, seeking the secrets of white power, but he is also the wily male lover/thief, watching, seduced, but finally powerful and successful. He returns with his trophy, leaving behind his enraged and enchanted victim, tamed momentarily by his song. To each waiting couple he is able to distribute a drop or two of precious fluid from what look like Mada’s old medicine bottles, mimicking Mada’s voice as he does so.

The web of allusions and possible readings is thick here. It is necessary, of course, to read Jangamuttuk’s journey in the larger terms of the novel’s concern for aboriginal genocide and survival. But it is surely worrying, in this episode, and in a number of others in the novel, that the maternal and female is compressed with the colonial power as the site of struggle. Mudrooroo’s Mada figure comes close to Kristeva’s abject space, the maternal identified with death, the struggle for individuation through suppression of the female, the place of unquenchable, overwhelming desire, ‘a hunger which might never be satisfied’. This passage is all the stranger, since it is placed so early and influentially in the novel, but is at odds with less grotesque images of female power. Ludgee, the aboriginal woman for whom Fada entertains both sexual and religious desires, is given Dreaming powers, alongside her husband Jangamuttuk, and so empowered by the narrative. While I have argued elsewhere11 for the strategic courage of Mudrooroo’s ambivalent discursivity in Master, it is important to register also the ways in which the maternal is once again, in a text by a male writer, the site of fear, desire, loathing and masculine struggle for supremacy.

In Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet, the maternal is figured in terms of absence and impotence. Dolly Pickles, matriarch of the Pickles family, is the repository of a number of stereotypes of the female, but preeminently she is the sluttish, drunken and neglecting mother. She is the unfaithful wife and mother, ‘the woman astride the bed with her dress up ... sweat on her skin’; for the daughter she is cause of ‘the terrible boiling dark in the schoolgirl’s head, the confusion, the feeling, the
colour she can't put a name to' (15). Rose Pickle's childhood is spent retrieving her mother from the pub - 'I'll get her out in the end. I'll drag her home. I'll kick her shins, bite her arse. I'll get her out' (105) - where Dolly nests with her female friends:

Dolly was rooted to her soft chair in the Ladies' Lounge with all those wrinkled, smokefaced old girls who laughed like a flock of galahs and fluffed and preened and looked about with their black, still eyes, cold as anything. They rattled and prattled with gossip and rubbish, and yes, even their mouths were like horny beaks, and their tongues like dry, swollen fingers. Rose hated them, and she hated her mother with them. She should be home, heck someone should be home... (105)

There's a breathless venom in the writing here, in the long first sentence, in the male author's placing of such hatred into the mouth of the daughter, in the moral high ground worked over as the motherless child voices injustice - 'someone should be home'. The harpies at the bar - their need, their talk relished in the rhetorical pleasure of 'rattled and prattled with gossip and rubbish' - are all cold black eyes and horny beaks. There are glimpses of sympathy for the figure of Dolly, 'a damn goodlooking woman' going to seed, but she is overwhelmingly a pathetic and destructive figure of impotence and maternal neglect who infects everyone around her. The moral claims of the novel are not simple, but they are certainly not directed sympathetically at this figure of maternal failure.

The other maternal figure of Cloudstreet is Oriel Lamb. She is the counterpoint to Dolly's sodden impotence: busy, efficient to the point of mania, a shrewd businesswoman and housekeeper. But she is also figured as impotent, a site of death. She removes herself, is driven to remove herself from the family house, to camp in the backyard, because in the eyes of her simple-minded son Fish she no longer exists:

I want the water Lestah.
I'll take you down to the river sometime, son, when your mother's finished drivin Mr Clay off her mind. But even as he says it, it tastes like a lie. He knows Oriel wil never let him near the river again.
In the boat. Up in the water.
Hey, listen. I know. You can have a boat in the back. That's it, I'll get you a boat to have here. Dyou like that, mate? With oars and everything. You can even go fishin. Waddyasay?
Fish looks at the ceiling.
What's your name? Lester prompts.
Fish
Fish who?
Fish Lamb.
What's you proper name?
Samson.
Who's your Mum?
Who's your Mum?

... Your Dad?
You, Less.
Sisters?
Red and Hattie and Lane. (167)

The imagery of water and boats recur throughout the novel, swelling to become one aspect of the maternal, the place of baptism, joy, and death. It is the place in which Oriel, the mother who takes on the guilt of her son's near drowning, stands as door-keeper, forbidding a recurrence of the tragedy which took Fish's mind and left him a perpetual child. So it is that the role of the mother - guilt-ridden, authoritarian, protective - is seen, by Fish and by the novel, to be one of negation, abjection, and refusal of a larger, desired world of release. She cannot be named. Fish looks through her, never sees her after his accident. But he senses her power, her prohibition of his desire to see the water again, to row out on it in a repetition of the release he once almost experienced. The penultimate chapter - 'Moon, Sun, Stars' - thus becomes a moment of birthing as Fish escapes to the water's edge, 'sighing, slow, slow to the water that smacks him kisses when he hits'.

I feel my manhood, I recognize myself whole and human, know my story for just that long, long enough to see how we've come, how we've all battled in the same corridor time makes for us, and I'm Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this, and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me. (424)

Winton's moral and humanistic prose asks for a common sympathy: for Fish, as he seeks his identity, his birth; for Oriel, who in the final chapter is also released from her exile in the backyard; and for Dolly: 'The little boxy woman and the big blowsy woman folded end to end till the tent was a parcel that they hefted to their shoulders ... and then they went inside the big old house whose door stood open, pressed back by the breeze they made in passing' (426). The characters have 'all battled in the same corridor time makes for us', but it is the maternal which is registered as the place of struggle, the impossible place which must be acknowledged, in order to be surmounted. Fish's birth/death is not a separation from or a reunion with the maternal, but a self-birthing, a self-recognition. The narrative voice takes on the first-person consciousness of Fish here for the first time. His escape to the water is seen in Romantic, transcendent terms, as the proper achievement of manhood against all the protective prohibitions of the mother he would not name. So the role of mother, and the very space of the maternal, is re-
gistered as burden, impossible contradiction, the place of death. While the intentions of the text? Winton? are sympathetic towards 'all of us', female readers may have a very different attitude towards Cloudstreet, reacting against the straitjacket of self-pity or guilt which imprisons the female characters.

If Winton’s novel humanistically evokes the absence or impossibility of the maternal, Peter Carey’s The Tax Inspector attempts heights of grotesquerie in its investigation of the failure of maternal agency. Down the warped and violent generations of the Catchprice family, the men have passed the gift of incest to their sons, but the mothers have proved impotent to stop the horror: Granny blanks out the knowledge, Sophie had shot at her molesting husband, misssed and wounded the infant Benny, and fled. As Maria the tax inspector’s pregnancy grows, so does the narrative’s wild accusations and anti-realist claims. By the end of the novel, the greatest claim is that Benny, the molested and now bizarrely predatory sexual enigma of the Catchprice family, is some kind of avenging angel, hellish or transcendent, a freakish, embodied cry for maternal mercy from his prisoner Maria, his absent mother, the reader. Left in the incestuous arms of his father by a feeble and inept mother, Benny the beloved youngest son has become both the torturer and the ultimate sacrifice, an impossible image of the maternal he loathes and desires:

Maria felt already that she knew every part of her tormentor intimately: his thin wrists, his lumpy-knuckled fingers, his long, straight-sided, pearl-pink nails, his shiny hair ... his red lips, real red, too red...
He sat on the edge of the sofa, by her hip. He had one bare leg up, one out on the floor, not easily, or comfortably, but with his foot arched, like a dancer’s...He hunched his bare torso around the child and talked to it.
‘Give me my baby,’ Maria said again.
‘Benny,’ he said. ‘Little Benny.’
He talked to the child, intently, tenderly, with his pretty red lips making wry knowing smiles... He cupped and curved himself so much around her baby that she could barely see him – a crumpled blood-stained shirt, an arm, blue and cheesey, and small perfect fingers clenching. She would do anything to hold him. (276)

What is the reader to make of this ambivalent apocalypse to the novel? Maria’s desire for her newborn child, Benny’s tender insanity, his own orphaned vulnerability matched by his sexual malevolence, all compete for a place in this maternal economy. The reader’s sympathies are demanded for Benny – ‘She had no idea that he was as near as he had ever been to love. She saw only some pretty, blond-haired, Aussie surfer boy...’ (278). But the urgency of Maria’s task, the retrieval of her child, is also set-up. In this way, the final actions of the novel establish the maternal as the site of ferocious, incompatible, passionately violent
and nurturing drives. As the placenta separates from Maria’s womb, she manages to crush Benny’s skull, several times, with an iron bar, and to take back her child. Benny – ‘slowly, like a boy clowning at a swimming pool...’ – dies, relinquishing the child as mother Maria ‘took her little boy, warm, squirming, still slippery as a fish, and unfastened her bra, and tucked him in against her skin’ (279). Is the reader asked to champion this fierce, thrusting maternal instinct against the weak absence of agency in Granny and Sophie? To applaud the necessary execution of Benny the motherless child? To mourn his warped passing? All these possibilities are set up in the space of the maternal, and in such all-embracing ambivalence a bleak, unanswerable human fatedness is established.

Is it possible for Western literary traditions, so entrenched in a writing of the maternal through violently ambivalent imagery, or through simplistic, stereotyping symbols and structures, to find new ways of thinking and writing the maternal? Most educated westerners today live in a process of intellectual oscillation when thinking about motherhood. Their individual mothers are written for them by their eclectic knowledge of institutional realities: Freud more or less popularized, fiction and film, percolated feminist ideas; and their attitudes and actions in regard to the more abstract ‘maternal’ are directed too by their various experiences of being mothered. But it would be felt by a large number of such ‘educated westerners’ that the whole thing is problematic, if not traumatic. Hence the ‘God’s own country’ fundamentalism of the George Bush ‘family values’ campaign was so attractive? Hence the simplifying, individual-choice philosophy of the pro-abortion and wider feminist lobbies is all that is possible in the complex democracies now emerging? Is Luce Irigaray’s call for a cultural production which is able to help bring about change simply naïve in the face of long centuries of repressive representation of the maternal in Western societies, and elsewhere?

In closing, one particular contemporary situation will be narrated here, in the face of these questions. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the Australian government pursued a protectionist policy towards the children of aboriginal Australians. In reality this meant that thousands of young children were removed from the care of their parents, often single mothers deemed unfit to manage their children, and were placed in orphanages run by government or church bodies. This policy produced two and three generations of children and parents who have grown older without, in many cases, any contact. The wonderful blossoming of Aboriginal literature in English which is now occurring in Australia has enabled white readers to begin to understand something of the tragedy of aboriginal children and parents. The lament of the motherless child, and of the childless mother, is a common and often heartbreaking genre amongst aboriginal poets, and Kevin Gilbert’s 1988
anthology of aboriginal poetry, *Inside Black Australia*, carries many examples. Eva Johnson’s consciously child-like, almost pidgin voice in ‘A Letter to My Mother’ may be accused by indifferent academic perception as romanticizing, utopic, sentimental:

I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now  
White fulla bin take me from you, I don't know why  
Give me to missionary to be God’s child.  
Give me new language, give me new name  
All time I cry, they say – ‘that shame’  
I go to city down south, real cold  
I forget all them stories, my Mother you told  
Gone is my spirit, my dreaming, my name  
Gone to these people, our country to claim  
They gave me white mother, she give me new name  
All time I cry, she say – ‘that shame’  
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.  

I think what makes such poetry so hard for white, middle-class Australians to read is its (representation of a) wide open, sentimental cry. But while the critic may theorize the maternal, and the state of Western subjects’ melancholic loss of the maternal object, with its attendant double-edged rage and grief, this poem is clear-sightedly metonymic in its utopic connections. The mother, materially and symbolically, is ‘my spirit, my dreaming, my name’, a people, country, language. The ambiguities pointed to in Kristeva’s analysis of Western melancholic loss, are here directed outwards, as a mounting rage against those who have perpetrated such a loss, and as a claim to renewal. There is much of Irigaray’s symbolic gathering of rage against ‘the one who artificially cut the link with the mother in order to take over the creative power of all worlds’, operating here symbolically, and in the particular, named institutions and forces: ‘Missionary’, ‘the laws of White Man’, ‘this Burden’. The final stanza’s energy is that of grief turning into a verbal and political strength and solidarity – ‘Two Women we stand... We will silence this Burden, this longing, this pain/When I hear you my Mother give me my Name.’

At a recent lecture and reading by Aboriginal women poets in Melbourne, Australia, the air was bristling with social, political and literary contradictions. The audience, a mix of feminist and politically-active/aware students, was addressed by several Koori women. One main issue was the history of government and church orphanages, and the need felt by many Kooris to trace their black mothers. No sophisticated theoretical reasons were given by these speakers for their need. Could such a question have been helpfully asked by the audience? Could the genres of sentimental ballad, of motherless child seeking the comfort of the mother’s arms, been usefully critiqued in that place, at that time? Jostling against each other in the minds of many of the white, middle-
class audience, I am sure, were the sophisticated theories, representations and experiences of 'The Maternal', with the claims of a deeply-felt need in many aboriginal people, which had been driven into the realm of trauma. Hopefully, many feminists, including myself and others in the audience, had their representations - or their right to free-ranging, intellectual modes of representation - shaken, even reshaped, by such a moment. The locus of Aboriginal rights is at the moment where politics, literature and human reality are intersecting in a painful and regenerative way in Australia. Questions of the maternal inform many of the stories of Ruby Langford and Sally Morgan, and poetry particularly by women aboriginal poets. Sophisticated white theorists, as well as university memorandum writers, can benefit from the strong and real role played by Aboriginal women in their valuing and practice of the maternal.

NOTES


3. Ibid., p. 5.

4. Ibid., p. 61.


6. Ibid., p. 41.

7. Ibid., p. 42.


9. Irigarary, op.cit., p. 43.


11. See the essay 'Critical Solidarity: Towards (Inter)Change in Australian Aboriginal Writing', in Aboriginal Voices (University of Minnesota P., 1993, forthcoming).

How do you deal with the influence of the European heritage, both on your life and on your work – in contrast to the Australian experience?

I suppose everything has an influence on you when you are writing. I don’t think I’m trying to come to terms with either of the backgrounds. I didn’t find it terribly hard to move from Britain to Australia. I came with an absolutely empty mind. As I grow older, I think more and more of my childhood experiences come to the fore – they become more vivid. Also, of course, when you move from one country to another, the country you’ve just left becomes more vivid; so that all that experience to do with travel is useful for the writer. But I don’t see myself as trying to manage either place; I’m just using it for the craft. I’m not distressed by it – I’m not trying to overcome it, as far as I know.

What is the significance of having a European connection in the novels set in Australia, such as The Well?

You need to be going to the wheat country to get the feeling that I tried to capture in The Well; and even in The Well Hester sings Schubert lieder, songs she learned from her governess, who was from Europe. At the beginning I wasn’t going to have any of Hester’s background in the novel; I wanted just to have a flat, mystery sort of story without any complications; and I found that I couldn’t write the book until I had explored Hester’s childhood. And so the complications come in because of your own handling of the craft, in a way; I needed to do my research into the character.

Is the cultural experience of people living in these two worlds more important than the actual countries?

I haven’t any novel completely set in Europe. In Peabody [Miss Peabody’s Inheritance] they go on their trip, and in Milk and Honey there is reference to the way in which they lived and the fact that the characters are still trying to preserve a closely knit way of living that they knew before they came to a strange country. That interests me very much – the way in which people might try and continue their way of living.
When you come to Australia you really have to take on a new way, simply because of the climate when you’re here in summer. It took me a little while to develop a way of living different from my previous way.

*With these differences in mind, what does living in Australia mean to you?*

It is a voluntary exile, in a way, though I didn’t feel exiled. But recently I heard a wonderful phrase from a Jewish writer, in a Melbourne newspaper, who said we are all exiles from childhood. As I am in my seventieth year and as I’ve been approaching older age, my childhood, from which I am exiled, is creeping up more and more; and, as I said: coming to the new country, I did think back.

The first story I wrote here was ‘A Hedge of Rosemary’, in which I try and link – I didn’t know I was trying to link – the two countries; but in fact I am, because there is the old man walking down this Oriental type of road – what seems Oriental to him – remembering his time as a boy in the Midlands in England, and all the factories and the joy of seeing some geese on the village green when he goes out in the country as a child. I didn’t realize I was trying to bridge this gap of movement from one place to the other, but obviously you do things without knowing what you’re doing.

*Do the Midlands mean ‘home’ to you, and how does your parents’ home fit in with this notion?*

Well, if your parents are in exile, too – my mother being Viennese and living in the industrial Midlands of England, for the whole of her life being homesick and refusing to go back to Vienna after the War.... My father, of course, was in his own country, but he was an exile in a way, because his father had been the son of a farmer; there were, I think, a number of brothers and they all had farms, and my father’s father, who had a hernia all his life, refused to have it operated on, so he had to leave the farm. People have to leave for various reasons – their background...; and then some of that comes out in the child, as in the case of my father.

*As a child we identify through our parents and our emotional bonds with them. Did you have a strong tie to your mother?*

In my own case, I could never do anything that was right for my mother, and it took me years to realize that; I suppose she minded awfully how we both (I have a sister) turned out. She had the ability to make you see all the faults in the person you were with.

*Out of jealousy?*
I don’t know if it would be jealousy or envy, or whether she had a way of seeing things about people. One of the things she said about my own husband was that he would turn me out into the streets – which he didn’t, and he never would have. Whether or not she was afraid he might – that could undermine you when you’re very young.

All these little things are very useful for writing, and one of the ways of overcoming them is to create fiction from them. If anybody had said that to me some years ago, I would have been really enraged – that I was getting over something by creating a fiction. But then I read this marvellous quotation by Flaubert, that fiction was a result of a deep and hidden wound. When I think of all the different writers – think of Patrick White, for example (I’m not putting myself on the same level as Patrick White) – when I read his biography I thought how true this thing of Flaubert is, because he was such a sick man and had such quarrels with lifelong friends and never spoke to them again. I haven’t done anything like that; I’m not dramatic.

Your mother-figures in the novels appear very dominant, whereas the father-figures are quite emotional, even though they cannot express their feelings properly ...

... Or else the daughter doesn’t take it quite properly. And, of course, in the case of the mother – in the case of Cabin Fever – there is more homage to the mother. My Father’s Moon has more homage towards the father. Well, in the third book – if I’m allowed to have it ....

Does that mean that you are working on a sequel to My Father’s Moon and Cabin Fever?

I am working on something. I’m not sure if it will be a success or a dreadful failure. I tried not to write this book – this is the third book, after My Father’s Moon and Cabin Fever; it’s the third volume, and it might be that it isn’t the right thing to write. When I was in Melbourne, three people, including the publisher himself, spoke to me and said they thought that I should try and write a third book to go with those two. Of course, I really wanted to write it, but I felt I shouldn’t, because I have the idea that you shouldn’t try and create a fiction until the end is past. The first two books are largely autobiographical in background; so in the third book I’m not looking back except, in the way of writing, one does look back all the time. But at the same time it is covering things that are not complete. And that might be mistaken.

Do you think of yourself as a female or a feminist writer?
I just think of myself as a writer. I don’t really draw the line so clearly between woman and man writer, and certainly the feminists in Australia have been a bit put out by me because I have said in public more than once that I couldn’t get on with my writing till I knew what I was going to cook for the family dinner in the evening. That has annoyed people very much.

Nonetheless, most of your protagonists are women ...

Yes, but I’ve also got some very important men in the novels. Mr Bird is very, very important in The Well. The dramatic moment in The Well for me is when Hester looks at Mr Bird’s accounts and then is forced to look at herself. And Mr Bird’s advice to Hester, which must be the hardest advice to give to a woman: that some man might come and want her, but not really want her – want her land. Which is a terribly painful thin, and Mr Bird manages to do that.

And then I’ve got Mr Frome, in Miss Peabody, who is also a powerful man. He doesn’t come in a great deal, but his mere existence as Debbie Frome’s father, and also someone to whom Miss Thorne actually feels – not humbled by, exactly – but she meets more than her match in Mr Frome, and she isn’t used to meeting her match, she’s used to being higher than everybody, and she almost imagines that Mr Frome may be a bit fond of her at one point. So he somehow has – to use a cliché – got under Miss Thorne’s skin without any intention on his part, simply by being what he is.

I find Mr. Bird and Mr. Frome very powerful people. I may have kept them under surveillance a little bit, but I feel they are very powerful men.

Edwin Page in The Sugar Mother appears to be the ‘female’ partner in his relationship with his wife. Is she the dominating person?

Yes, she is in a way, because it’s a role reversal. Because until recently it was a man who went on study leave, and not a wife. That is one of the things I wanted to bring in – the reversal that has happened. But what happens in the novel is that this completely uneducated woman and her daughter take Edwin for a glorious ride, but they also give him a nice time while his wife is away. And he hasn’t got to tell his wife about it – she’s not going to give him a chance to tell, because she always talks so much. And also he has taken a look at his own life and the way in which the shipboard friendships have crafted his life. So he’s never really had a chance to stray out of that – but in fact he does, while he’s got Leila and her mother and this baby coming, and so on. It would be interesting, really, to know what would happen to Edwin later on.
The other two male characters you talked about, Mr Birch and Mr Frome, represent the traditional role of men in society; they know their position in life, in society.

I think that’s very important. And then they work from that. Hester up to that point has known where she stands in society, but the minute she lets that go, she goes right over. She does take that look at herself. I think all is not lost for Hester. At the end, when she’s about to tell the Boarden children this story that no-one’s going to believe, she’s getting rid of that, and she’ll have to live without Kathy and she will manage, because Kathy’s going off on that religious trip. So there’s a fairly optimistic ending for Hester.

What does the relationship between the two women mean for Hester?

What she gets from Kathy is the reliving of a teenage that she never really had. And, at the same time, Kathy will have acquired some background that she hasn’t had before. So they’ve both gained from their relationship.

Would you say that Hester represents the virgin mother?

She represents a virgin. The mere fact that she has the well sealed up by Mr. Boarden’s men makes it clear that she has pushed everything out of sight, out of mind, repressed everything sexual. She can’t stand the thought of Kathy being taken by some uneducated, uncultured oaf as a husband. For her it is too late to be anything other than a virgin, as she’s already in her sixties, I think.

Is it possible to apply the same image to another character?

You get the same idea of the Virgin with Child with Leila and the baby – but, of course, Leila is not immaculate, she’s far from it; she must have been pregnant when they got there. But again, you can have two different kinds of virgin mothers. You can have the one who is immaculate and you can have the other kind. When you do obstetrics in the war, all the young mothers with their babies are like Virgin Marys, they all have the same positioning and the same devotion and the same tenderness that you attribute to the Virgin Mary with Child. So it doesn’t really matter if they are immaculate or not.

Some of the younger female characters seem to be fairly inarticulate.

Yes. Leila hardly speaks really in the novel; I think I did that on purpose. Debbie Frome speaks quite a lot, and so does Gwenda. Gwenda refuses, for example, to leave the party in Vienna. She is very much acted upon-
she's initiated by Miss Thorne. But she also expresses herself physically by having her period all over the place, which is a good reminder for Miss Thorne that Gwenda has another purpose in life. So the characters do express themselves as much as is necessary for what the particular novel is.

What about the stronger characters?

With people who are more powerful, like Hester and Miss Thorne, it is as though they're infallible in one way, like the gods, but they're fallible as well. In a sense, my powerful characters are fallible; they've got a skin that can be got under.

On the other hand, they are often quite lonely. Do you think that loneliness is a prominent experience in people's lives?

Do you mean the life-lie? I think that most human beings, essentially, are alone, and if you spend some time nursing, you will discover that people are entirely alone in their illness, however many visitors come. I think in ordinary life most people do experience either a sense of being outcast or alone or inferior or something not as they would like to be. Fortunately, those people do have a sort of a life-lie or something that keeps them going. Or they have somebody that they can really love – and this is more important, really, than being loved by someone. Because you could be loved by someone and not really care much about the person who is loving.

I find that, as I get older, the idea that the human individual wants to be liked rather than loved is easier to take – and also having people that you really like and can trust, without being head-over-heels in love with them. And in a person's life there are only a limited number of people that rank as this. And the novelist or short-story writer has to come to that realization; because you don't know it when you are young.
Marcelle Freiman

EUCALYPTUS

Sensing her precariousness
perched on the edge of the planet
the naked island-continent stoically
revealed her hand –
a myriad silver eucalyptus trees
their red-stemmed red-rimmed leaves
a pointillist monotony.

In the flush of summer
they strip off their clothing
make statements of ochre and soft pink,
crusty brown and velvet grey.
Their hanging flower brushes
transient of pink, yellow and palest green
and sturdy sticky seeds that fall
dare the stones to let them grow
into huge knotted giants
or grey stringy-barked creatures
with fibrous weathered skin.

Family Myrtaceae fringes the land
by a sea of white-rimmed kingfisher blue,
with first inhabitants
they grasp the salt-sand
witness of bloodprints
and backdrop of legends
they slide unconsciously as dreams
and reaching always for the sun
they balance.
They’re penning the hostels with razor wire —
and he walks it like a tightrope
his large palmed hand
cradles a heavy ‘panga’
its clean-sharpened blade
held parallel and alert.

There is no other place for him —
but this tightened wire of theirs
that divides inside from out
their space from his.

But no fence will enclose a human soul
whose gall exhausted runs
into crevices between grains of sand...

Wire unravels, a spring released,
uncoils in silver shards
jagged bright as lightning
it aims with the sureness of steel
unbarbed coiling over the land
a net of metal with arms to the sky
like a thousand buckled railway-lines.

The five o’clock train draws slowly
from Jeppe Station to Soweto.
The panga cuts random through the dusk,
targets flesh that freezes
bloodless with shock
as the blade hacks and beats
people thrown out like sacks of grain
while the stones between the railway-lines
grind themselves together and weep.

Stars look down from the roof of sky.
The night turns to another scarred day.
At the hostel in the morning
the palm that held the handle
cradles like a melon
the head of a beaten brother...
the wire that held his sinews taut
snaps as if oiled by tears
for one on whom revenge
has played its turn –
and it is hard to tell
whether it was them
or it was them...

Mark Mahemoff

GREG

A body was found drifting in the Parramatta River.
Its face was wrinkled, swollen white,
chewed to anonymity by fish.
That wasn’t written in the newspaper
but you can imagine it.

I’d known him for some months
and had been drawn into a friendship
by the quiet way he went about his business
in the sheltered workshop.
He managed his psychosis
like a loaded semi-trailer
on a steep mountain road.

While his body was being sliced and probed for answers
I was telling his girlfriend the news.
She cried with the honesty of someone
who hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye.
We sat in mute grief
knowing that’s all we could do.
We both went to the funeral that was held in a small coastal town. Greg's scattered family gathered for the occasion and they could all see him in each other. One had his eyes. Another his mouth or voice. Greg was in everyone and the silence revealed birds as we inhaled life from the newly dug earth.

SOME NIGHTS

Some nights your absence has a shape that I hold close like a pillow or memories. But slowly it becomes less you and more the lack of anyone to share a smile, an understanding. When the phone rings unexpectedly I always hope it's you but at the sound of your voice I find nothing left to say. I look around my flat and know how empty it would be with all you left behind removed. In fact my life would have less substance if I did not grant our past the courtesy of such sad moments.
No (Wo)man is an Island: Rewriting Cross-Cultural Encounters within the Canadian Context

What does our conference theme, nationalism versus internationalism, mean in the contemporary Canadian context? In deploring the way the ‘four major Western news agencies operate’ to knit the world together through the production of what he terms ‘out-of-scale trans-national images that are now reorienting international social discourse and process’, Edward Said calls in *Culture and Imperialism* for ‘an internationalist counter-articulation’. This counter-articulation would develop ‘a way of regarding our world as amenable to investigation and interrogation without magic keys, special jargons and instruments, curtained-off practices’. Instead of such magic keys, this counter-discourse that he proposes would articulate ‘the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together’. To complete this analysis, ‘we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices – inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions – all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography’. Writing within the United States, Said sees national experience as a limit to be transcended, and argues that to achieve his ideally contrapuntal global perspective the writer must work through such attachments to an appreciation of post-imperial global mixings.

From my perspective in Canada, Said’s call, addressed to U.S. humanists, articulates a program already largely in place in Commonwealth and post-colonial studies throughout the world, indeed almost everywhere but in the United States. The only difference might lie in the understanding of nation. Where Said stresses nation as limitation and limit, many Canadians see our kind of nationalism as enabling and nurturing those differences we wish to maintain from the United States. Our nation acts as a bulwark against the international media dominance that Said rightly identifies as an extension of U.S. nationalism onto the world stage. Surely there are different kinds of internationalism just as there are different kinds of nationalism. It is too hasty, I think, to conclude with Michael Ignatieff as he meditates on the horrors of Bosnia, that ‘Nationalism everywhere exists to lift the burden of responsibility from a believer’s shoulders’. We need
to reimagine nationalism and internationalism as equally charged with assuming responsibility and replacing belief with earned understanding and vigilant questioning.

As Said implies, we need not oppose nationalism against internationalism in an antagonistic relation. They can be revisioned as part of a continuum in which we can move from our own national identifications and struggles:

to situate these in a geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict. 7

This is the project Helen Tiffin and I undertook in Decolonising Fictions, the book Anna Rutherford of Dangaroo Press, that model venture in cooperative internationalism, is launching at this conference. 8 We tried to show how literature and literary criticism can play a major role in decolonising imaginations and opening up a new model for international relations based on mutual respect for national and other differences.

The recent success of Sports Illustrated in circumventing rules designed to protect the Canadian magazine market from U.S. dumping, and the lack of protection for Canadian publishing in general from our U.S.-oriented Tory government, make truly urgent these distinctions between a post-colonial internationalism that respects differences and a new imperialist internationalism that masks U.S. nationalism throughout the world.

My work on post-colonial revisions of Shakespeare's Tempest continues the post-colonial interrogation of imperialist cross-cultural encounter from differently situated national responses to invasion and appropriation. In Canada, writers of First Nations, settler-invader, and multicultural immigrant descent approach the problem of reconceptualizing cross-cultural encounter from very different experiences and perspectives. Such responses also vary according to gender. My title phrase, 'No (wo)man is an island', both echoes and distorts John Donne's original pronouncement, which has been updated and reiterated in Said's new globalism. Whereas Donne uses the negative to proclaim an internationalist 'family of man' in a statement that advances itself as self-evident, my shift in gender points to the way in which the apparent universality of 'man' disguises a privileging of the male sex as the norm establishing the human. To say that 'No (wo)man is an island' is to highlight the gender difference obscured in the original pronouncement, and to shift the focus from merely assuming human interconnectedness to understanding human differences in order to achieve a genuinely shared vision of international and cross-gender cooperation. It is also to point to the ways in which woman is an island, or is figured as an island, in mass culture and advertisements, that is, in capitalist and neo-imperialist representations of the world. Here I am
thinking of Judith Williamson's insightful article, 'Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization', which devastatingly explores the implications of its observation that 'The "desert island" is the ideal location for the "other"; it is more easily colonized than an entire continent, and picturing the colony as female makes it so much more conquerable and receptive'.

Williamson demonstrates the continuities linking contemporary advertising, tourism, and classic narratives of cross-cultural encounter in their deployment of the island/female conflation. She argues that 'Our culture, deeply rooted in imperialism, needs to destroy genuine difference, to capture what is beyond its reach; at the same time, it needs constructs of difference in order to signify itself at all'.

In her view, 'Woman' is 'the main vehicle for this representation'.

The island as body politic/female body/colonized space has received less critical attention than the contesting human figures of Prospero, Caliban, and more recently, Miranda and Sycorax. Yet as Michel Tournier's rewriting of Robinson Crusoe (itself a rewrite of The Tempest) in his novel Friday demonstrates, the island/female conflation is implicit in the source-text and crucial to our understanding of what is at stake in rewriting those canonical texts of empire, The Tempest and Robinson Crusoe. The island has long been a crucial element in English nationalism and an important symbol for Caribbean writers claiming their own place in a world system of competing nationalisms. But in Canada, where nationalism has usually taken continental form, the island functions more ambivalently and diversely in our writers’ wrestlings with the Tempest model.

If we are to find a non-repressive model of nationalism to replace the violences of past and present, we need to unpack this conflation of body politic, female body, national place, and dominance. Critics are working through this conflation from positions based in deconstructionist, feminist, post-colonial, Marxist, semiotic, and nationalist critique, but we are only beginning to bring these variously generated insights together into a coherent formulation of a new model of understanding. Judith Williamson, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, and Trinh T. Minh-ha have been especially helpful for my still embryonic thinking on these matters.

The St. Lawrence River-based 'Lawrentian thesis' has long been the dominant model in Canadian historiography and literary criticism for conceptualizing Canada as a female space opened up through travel down the St. Lawrence river into a 'new world' heart of darkness. Douglas LePan in his poem, 'A Country Without a Mythology', Margaret Atwood in her Journals of Susanna Moodie, and Northrop Frye in his Canadian literary criticism all solidified this envisioning of national space as a female/native/landscape conflation to be penetrated and opened up. Timothy Findley in Headhunter articulates the dark side of this imperialist/national civilising mission, explicitly through the observations of a contemporary visitor who retraces the Lawrentian journey into the heart of a continent devastated by these earlier arrivals, and implicitly through the entire
book’s careful resituating of Conrad’s novel and its characters in the industrial heartland of Toronto. Findley’s *Headhunter* and Marlene Nourbese Philip’s *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* could usefully be read together contrapuntally to illuminate the current impasse reached by imperialist attempts to penetrate the other, not only through physical dominance but also through structures of knowledge. Each posits islands of achieved community in a world at war with itself. I had some trouble writing that last sentence because the metaphors we are accustomed to rely on are being turned on their heads and radically questioned by these books: Findley undermines the madness/sanity distinction; Philip, the darkness/light opposition; each questions models that separate the civilized from the barbarian and that presume to name the other. Both books show the one-sidedness of cross-cultural encounter when participants cannot see the full humanity of the other.

But as I have suggested, models of island settings for such encounters are not necessarily any less repressive than that of the conquering voyage inland. Recognition of the conflated island/body politic/female body/contested space dynamic, however, can help us understand imperialism’s conquering relation to place as complicit with misogynist and capitalist understandings of human nature and human community. These understandings need to be questioned and revised. Shakespeare’s *Tempest* has been used, on stage and in criticism and teaching, to promote English nationalism under the guise of ‘universalism’. Thanks to Gauri Viswanathan, we now know that English as an academic discipline and teaching curriculum developed as an experiment in social control in India. ‘Shakespeare’, the pinnacle of achievement in this discipline, came to represent, in the words of Henry Scadding, a teacher at Upper Canada College in late nineteenth century Toronto, the “clear masculine, right-judging intellects” of Englishmen. Indeed, Scadding considered Shakespeare, ‘Virtually a Type of Colonist ... appreciated among the junior members of the family of nations, – among the human down-rootings from the great mother-Tree of England’. The *Tempest* has played a central role in these legitimating myths of empire, continuing on into the present in mutated form, as Terence Hawkes so convincingly demonstrates in ‘Swisser-Swatter: making a man of English letters’.

Yet while the school system used English to promote British island nationalism and its extension throughout the world, post-colonial readers constructed resistant readings that made space for their alternatively conceived perspectives. Caliban’s claim in *The Tempest* that ‘This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother’ asserts a matrilineal claim that has inspired Edward Brathwaite’s development of what he calls an ‘aesthetics of Sycorax’ that has enabled him to celebrate his Barbadian island nationalism in poems such as *Mother Poem* in what he terms a ‘calibanized’ or ‘creolised’ English that has been indigenized/modified by its contact with the African Diaspora.
In ‘Bad Words’, Marlene Nourbese Philip brilliantly explores and appropriates the implications of Brathwaite’s conflation of woman/island/speech in the service of a pan-Caribbean nationalism. Her black middle-class Miranda learns to curse, first from listening to her friend Clarence (Caliban), and finally from attempting to imitate her neighbour Pomona Adams (Sycorax), ‘a large and beautiful brown-skinned woman’ who has mastered the powerful and forbidden words, the ‘language of badness’, which Miranda instinctively knows that she too will need to ensure her safe passage through higher education into the ‘forbidden spaces’ controlled by a white world. The powerful and forbidden language she learns counters the abstractions favoured by her parents, ‘words like politics and freedom’, with the physical presence of the lived-in body. She treasures these words in silence, finally selecting a Sunday for her initiation into a public speech that she knows will invite sure punishment. Yet when Miranda curses, she feels only fulfilment, savouring how ‘The moist, wet, inner pink space of her mouth had become a tender womb to bad words, any words – mother’s cunts, pricks, dicks – the words were embedded deep inside Miranda filling up all the secret places and spaces created by the forbidden’. Philip links this reclaiming of personal female space, cursing, and black diasporic identity to the history of colonization and slavery in the Caribbean. In an unpublished talk delivered in Port of Spain in March 1990 at a conference of Caribbean women writers, she notes:

> Whether we conceive of the space between the legs as one space, the cunt; two spaces, the cunt and womb; or one continuous space extending from cunt to womb, control of and over this space or spaces is a significant marker of the outer space...The black woman came to the New World with only the body and that most precious of resources – the space between her legs...the space between the black woman’s legs became the place – site of oppression – necessary and vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer spaces in a designated form – the plantation machine...

The theoretical counterpart of Brathwaite’s and Philip’s aesthetics of Sycorax may be found in Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective. Rojo conceptualizes the entire Caribbean as a ‘meta-archipelago’ that ‘has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center’. Rojo’s image of repeating islands as a ‘spiral chaos’ radically transforms conventional notions of fixed national/inter-national boundaries and relations. The potential of such a thesis for reconceptualizing how we see Canada is inspiring: we would have to reimagine Canada, less as the top half of a continent monolithic in its conception and lineaments, than as itself reconceived and continually metamorphosed through the metaphor of the repeating island. Although Canada’s history, geography, and traditions are very different from those of the Caribbean (so meticulously documented
by Rojo), there are some precedents within Canadian traditions for this kind of rearticulation of national space. In a coffee-table book called *The Islands of Canada*, Marian Engel points out that ‘Canada is comically rich in islands. We speak casually of them in thousands. The Arctic is almost completely composed of islands....There are hundreds of thousands of lakes, each of which has its islands’.21 To Engel, who describes herself as ‘afflicted with islomania’,22 ‘Islands in their nothingness are everything to us, the heart of our history and the home of our imagination.’23 By nothingness, she appears to mean that they are no longer central to our experience in our highly centralized world. ‘Many of them,’ she asserts, ‘have been relegated to the hall-closet roles of Indian reserve, summer resort, and artists’ colony.’24 Here again we encounter the conflation noted by Williamson of colonization, tourism, and the creation of cultural myths. What initially appears a trite paradox in a celebratory book that skims the surface, refusing introspection, points through its metaphors to the repressed half of the Canadian settler-invader identity. Gushing over the ‘romance’ of islands’ ‘true isolation’, Engel writes: ‘we seek out islands for our own reasons. These reasons run deep in all of us. We grew up on island stories like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*.’25 These stories charge the romance of *The Islands of Canada*, a romance I find imbued with what Renato Rosaldo terms ‘imperialist nostalgia’.26

But in her novel *Bear*, Engel reinscribes these hereditary stories with a twist that makes that nostalgia, with its undercurrents of ambivalence and guilt carried by Canada’s settler-invader heritage, undermine the pastoral romance of her chosen form. Engel’s *Bear*, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, and Aritha Van Herk’s *Places Far from Ellesmere* form a triad of feminist revisionings of island narratives, island space, and female bodies, reclaiming this space of contestation as a place of renewed beginnings. *Bear* and *Surfacing* show their female protagonists undergoing ritual penance for the invasion and genocide practised by their ancestors, seeking absolution for their guilt from the spirits of the land. Neither is ready to face First Nations’ nationalisms directly. These land claims appear only in displaced form through totemic animals. The wrongs done to First Nations’ peoples are implicitly recognised but the focus falls on how the imperial project has wounded and dehumanized the colonizers. These novels seem to answer bell hook’s call for white critics to examine the construction of their whiteness before seeking to understand the blackness of others.27

Aritha van Herk builds on the teachings of *Surfacing* and *Bear* in *Places Far from Ellesmere* to create a complex conversation among the four Canadian places in which her protagonist takes form – Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary, and Ellesmere – and the Russia of her imagination in dialogue with Tolstoy. ‘Ellesmere: Woman as Island’ occupies the final section and orients the whole book. In taking *Anna Karenina* to Ellesmere Island, Van Herk’s narrator speculates: ‘Perhaps you can un/read her, set her free. There on that desert island, between the harebells and the blue dreaming
of glaciers.' Like Atwood and Engel, Van Herk journeys north to find her healing island, what she calls 'this islanded woman waiting to be read a justice or a future'. Ellesmere teaches both 'pleasure, the pleasure of oblivion, pleasure endorsed, its doors thrown wide' and 'what reading means'. It makes its author a new woman, ready to write and to read the justice and the future denied Anna Karenina and the women excluded or marginalised in the canonical island adventures of imperialist narratives. Van Herk interrogates western constructions of Woman (implicitly white) through arguments with Tolstoy and Rudy Wiebe, and counters the homogenizing narratives of 'empire boys' with one Canadian woman's very particular story. Ellesmere attempts that geographical/literary reconfiguration of male plotting I called for at the beginning of my paper, and demands a more thorough unravelling than I have space for here.

The contrapuntal rereading strategies embodied in van Herk's text may usefully be compared to the contrapuntal musical and dramatic transformations of stereotypes of white, Metis, and native women parodied and explored in Monique Mojica's brilliant play, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*. Here, body politic and woman's body are explicitly and intimately related:

He said, 'It's time for the women to pick up their medicine in order for the people to continue.' (washes hands, arms)

She asked him, 'What is the women's medicine?' The only answer he found was, 'The women are the medicine, so we must heal the women.'

Travelling through five hundred years of history and moving through space throughout the Americas, this play enacts that healing process until finally Contemporary Woman #1 can say:

So many years of trying to fit into feminist shoes. O.K. I'm trying on the shoes; but they're not the same as the shoes in the display case. The shoes I'm trying on must be crafted to fit these wide, square, brown feet. I must be able to feel the earth through their soles.

So, it's International Women's Day, and here I am. Now, I'd like you to take a good look – (turns slowly, all the way around). I don't want to be mistaken for a crowd of Native women. I am one. And I do not represent all Native women. I am one.

In these passages, the islanded woman reclaims her own space and defies categorization, simultaneously asserting her individuality and her communal participations. The play concludes with the following triumphant exchange between Contemporary women #1 and #2, singing first in Spanish and then in English: 'A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground'; 'Then, it is done, no matter how brave its warriors, nor how strong its weapons.' The final visual image scripted for the audience before the blackout, declares: 'Blind Faith leaps in the dark.'
Perhaps that leap is one all artists must take as they seek to conjure more fulfilling images of women's lives, community solidarity, and national identifications than those provided by the master narratives of the past. The nationalism of Monique Mojica's play incorporates five hundred years of cross-cultural encounter, respecting the experiences of every native and every Metis and mestizo group, and reaching across linguistic and racial boundaries to create an international vision based on mutual respect. Like the other women writers whose work I've touched on here, however, Mojica uses her writing to effect the healing that precedes respect. That healing involves addressing the ways in which women have been constructed and isolated as islands (either defined as desert space to be colonized—defeated, vilified and expunged, like Sycorax; or defined as beyond/above the realm of public activity, islanded in protected enclaves that deny their agency, like Miranda or Conrad's Intended). Before it is completed, it will require redefining the female body and the body politic, and reorienting the justifying disciplines of conquest—not just English studies, but also geography, ethnography, history, and psychology. Until we have undertaken that critique more thoroughly, we will not know the full potential of either of the two movements under discussion this week, of nationalism or internationalism. Woman as island/body politic/constructor of difference has served as the justifying master-narrative of imperialist internationalism and of various nationalisms. We are only beginning to discover the implications of the counter-phrase: 'No (Wo)man is an island.'

NOTES

1. This article was first delivered as a conference paper at the European ACLALS conference, entitled Nationalism versus Internationalism, held in Graz, Austria, in May 1993. For the time taken to research and write this paper and for travel funds to attend the conference, I am indebted to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada who generously provided me with a Research Grant for 1992-95, a Research Time Stipend (1993) and a Conference Travel Grant to deliver the paper in Graz.
3. Ibid., p. 312
4. Ibid., p. 318.
5. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 33.
18. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 12.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 11.
29. Ibid., p. 143.
30. Ibid., p. 130.
31. Ibid., p. 132.
34. Ibid., pp. 58-59.
35. Ibid., p. 60.
36. Ibid.
NICHOLAS THOMAS

Gender and the Politics of Tradition: Alan Duff's *Once were warriors*

In a recent article on the political and economic crisis in New Zealand, Bob Jesson has argued that the Labour governments of the 1980s were crippled by a contradiction between new right economics and liberal social policy. A similar, and indeed related, contradiction bears upon indigenous peoples – not just in Aotearoa but also in other white settler societies such as Australia, Canada, and Hawaii. On one side, indigenous cultures are widely legitimized and celebrated in liberal and consumer culture, but in an idealized form that maps uneasily onto the urbanized and apparently ‘acculturated’ way of life of most Maori. On the other hand, Maori have suffered disproportionately during the recession and are now unemployed in record numbers; the restructuring of the labour market is likely either to exclude substantial numbers in the longer term, or restrict most to new forms of underpaid casual work; their standard of living, like that of the poor in general, is most directly affected by cutbacks in health, welfare, and education. This article does not describe the social predicament, but is concerned rather with how indigenous cultural producers negotiate the gap between accounts of their identity that emphasize some archaic authenticity, and contemporary circumstances.

As New Age and environmental values become progressively established within mainstream political discourses, indigenous cultures are increasingly represented through prestigious museum exhibitions; they are referred to increasingly through cultural diplomacy, in national symbols, and in advertising; they receive greater emphasis and legitimacy in the school curriculum; yet these constructions usually privilege awesome works of traditional art, spirituality, attachment to the land, and tribal rituals, and are usually devoid of references to the oppressive and discriminatory character of colonial policies, and the variety of living conditions of twentieth century native peoples. Identity, in other words, is not historicized, but associated with the stable essences of *tapu* and *mana*; if the current wave of global ethnicization and discourse on cultural heritage and identity tends to essentialize all cultures, the trend is especially conspicuous and coercive for indigenous peoples in settler colonies, who are associated, in terms all too reminiscent of ‘noble savage’ imagery, with the past and with Arcadian simplicity. Though this efflorescence of liberal
white primitivism over the last decade or so has no doubt entailed more positive views of indigenous peoples than prevailed formerly, it has also clearly valued the indigenous through its opposition to modernity, and thus rendered indigenous modernity almost as a contradiction in terms. This is of course primarily a discourse of dominant white societies rather than a self-representation on the part of indigenous peoples; yet it is a powerful discourse, one whose terms cannot be entirely avoided, especially by those appropriating or attempting to appropriate the dominant media. Can indigenous writers represent contemporary identities, without conceiving of them as impoverished versions of a nobler tradition?

The novel explored here is concerned with the specific question of the ways in which present circumstances and notions of traditional identity are reconciled – or understood to be disjunct. This essay is a small part of a larger project that deals with cultural politics rather than literary interpretation, but I focus here on the text itself, rather than the political dynamics that it might be subsumed to, or debates around it, that can and certainly should be traced through reviews and correspondence columns. I should however say that the main critique found the sheer negativity of the book to be politically counterproductive, to play into the hands of racist Pakeha who could read it to confirm their view that Maori difficulties were caused by Maori inferiority rather than by the history of discrimination. Certainly, the qualified sense of reconstruction and optimism at the book's ending is overshadowed by the brute detail that is itemized before; given the economic decline and right-wing backlash in New Zealand, the concern that the book could inform a new or a hardened racism cannot be dismissed. As was the case with *The Satanic Verses*, the controversy, at least in the manifestations that I have seen, tended to collapse into an exchange of slogans that displaced any reading of the text; even Duff's own interventions and responses have projected more categorical views than the book itself sustained. If this impoverishment is to be avoided, the strategy of bracketing off the book's context, which may otherwise be unattractive, seems at least provisionally appropriate.

*Once were warriors*, Alan Duff's first novel, appeared in 1990. Critics and readers were 'blown away', as one put it, by the book's powerful idiom and uncompromising, unromanticized depiction of Maori life: 'These guvmint cunts take away ya dignity, they do. Fuckem. Man even had to go into the office in town every week Thursday to collect his dole cheque because he didn't have no address to giv em to send it to. And the way they look at you when you're gettin your cheque, y'd think it was their own fuckin bread they were givin away' (*OWW*, 171). The force of Duff's appropriation and reaccentuation of the language is marked by the fact that, when I presented this paper at a conference, I felt unable to read quotations from the book aloud: not because I was concerned about some impropriety in enunciating a language that has such a pronounced ethnic signature, but simply because my own unavoidable reaccentuation would
seem awkward and absurd, given the geographic, class, and ethnic differences that separate myself and Duff’s characters.

The title is, in a sense, the whole book. What has become of those who once were warriors? Are they now not-warriors rather than people who can be characterized in any more positive way? What does not-warriorhood look like? Can this negation be negated, can the condition be transcended? These are the novel’s questions; the point I seek to make is that its working through them turns above all upon familial and gender differences, upon ways men and women, children, adolescents, and adults are differently located and empowered with respect to traditions and contemporary circumstances.

‘Once were’ constructs the present as a residue, as a diminished or degenerate condition that remains, once something has been subtracted from something else, once a thing or a people is not what it was before. There are several ways in which Duff’s Heke family exemplify this imperfection or degeneracy, and, for the most part, evade representation in more positive terms. The book is one, it should be noted, that deals in exemplification: the typical nature of the family is emphasized at the beginning, as Beth Heke, resident of a government housing estate surveys the ‘going-nowhere nobodies’ of Pine Block; and Pine Block is not a particular housing estate but every housing estate. The opening sentences register her resentment at the view out the back window, beyond the fringe of the estate and over pasture toward the big trees and substantial home of a wealthy white man, and despair at the view in the other direction, or what is ‘A mile-long picture of the same thing: all the same, just two-story, side-by-side misery boxes’ (OWW, 7-8). The constitutive relation, at this point in the history, is not that the wealthy white man lives on land earlier expropriated from Maori, but that the ‘brown nobodies’ are state-housed and mostly state-fed on land purchased by the government from his estate. While a past understood as dispossession can be redressed through a struggle for land, the condition of welfare-recipient marks the failure of a modernist project of social provisioning, not the departure point for a narrative. Or so it seems in the opening chapters of Once were warriors. Beth had dreams, we’re told, of advancement toward the large, comfortable and peaceful house of Mr Trambert, but these have long evaporated; the Pine Block estate is scarred by neglect: abandoned cars and broken pavements are the material expressions of incomplete or fractured domesticities, domestic violence, alcoholism, and drug use.

The Heke family is marked as a non-family by father Jake’s interest in fighting and drinking, Beth’s own alcoholism and consequent neglect of the kids, and the children’s own difficulties in communicating with their parents and adjusting to wider circumstances. The failure is manifest in the fact that both parents miss one son’s day in court, when Boogie is made a ward of the state and removed to a Boys’ Home; both have been up late drinking, though Beth is also recovering from having been beaten
up. In the book’s opening sentences, that I referred to earlier, Beth juxtaposes not white and Maori, but the white man’s good luck in being born into his sweet world, and Beth’s bad luck ‘for being married to an arse-hole’; yet, as she says, she can’t help loving the ‘black, fist-happy bastard’. Jake is thus the author not only of Beth’s bruises, but of the wider predicament; Duff finds the type he exemplifies, not the ‘guvmint’ nor successful whites such as Trambert, responsible for the directionless unhappiness of Pine Block; this culpability is marked in the fact that Jake is unemployed more by inclination than lack of opportunity. Kinship locations and gender encode different relations to this situation: if the husband is charged with a degree of agency, the mother is a victim, yet a knowing and complicit one; she perceives the scene as hopeless and destructive, and possesses a vision that he does not. The younger children are innocent victims degraded by the circumstances that surround them; the adolescent daughter is a knowing victim in a paradigmatic sense, which I’ll discuss later, while the oldest son recapitulates the father’s faults in a more extreme form.

The problem of Maori people, Maori society, is thus allegorized by, or perhaps simply equated with, a familial problem, and the question of the scope for the expression of familial affection is one that is made to work hard at several points in the narrative. It is interwoven, however, with the theme of not-warriorhood, which I referred to earlier. Warriorhood is emblematic of the Maori past, and the effect of this past in the present is the locus of the problem of what being Maori means. I referred a moment ago to Beth being beaten up; what provokes this beating is an ‘insult’ to a group of Jake’s friends, a denunciation of their Maori toughness as mere perversion. Upstairs, daughter Grace overhears one of the drinkers asking her to fry some eggs to accompany their boiled feed, which Beth is not prepared to do:

What I serve up is what you get... This ain’t a fuckin restaurant... Someone saying something, Grace couldn’t quite make out, but her mother clear enough: The hell you mean, Maori way? You call yourselves Maoris? Then Jake telling her to shuddup, woman... And she telling him to go to hell... Maoris, eh? Can any of us in this room speak the language? No reply. What do we know of our culture?... Men’s voices, a chorus of em, telling her to shuddup and siddown... but Beth went right on at them. She told them the Maori of old had a culture, and he had pride, and he had warriorhood, not this bullying, man-hitting-woman shit, you call that manhood? It’s not manhood, and it sure as hell ain’t Maori warriorhood. (OWW, 28)

The next day, as Beth ruminates while drinking beer, Duff elaborates this through her stream of consciousness, that, without much subtlety, is made to work like a film’s voiceover or a tragedy’s chorus, telling us the moral of the tale.

we used to war all the time... We were savages. But warriors, eh. It’s very important to remember that. Warriors. Because, you see, it was what we lost when you,
the white audience out there, defeated us, conquered us, took our mana, left us with nothing. But the warrior thing got handed down, see. Well, sort of handed down; in a mixed-up sense it did. It was more toughness that got handed down from generation to generation. Toughness, eh. Us Maoris might be every bad thing in this world but you can’t take away from us our toughness. But this toughness, Pakeha audience of mine, it started to mean less and less as the world got older ... even before computers, it all made toughness redundant. Now thassa a good word for a Maori, eh, redundant? (OWW, 47-48)

A reader might feel at this point that the prose exhibits a reprehensible toughness of the kind attributed to Maori: what’s said seems to leave little scope for survival, let alone redemption. This negative reading is reinforced by the fact that Jake, in his own stream of expression, reiterates this characterization of himself, at least in so far as it dissociates his ‘toughness’ from any Maori origin or tradition. He fantasizes that others in the pub see him as a chief, ‘a Maori warrior chief – no, not a Maori, I can’t speak the language and people’ll know I can’t, and it’ll spoil it – an Indian chief, a real Injun, not one of them black thievin bastards own half the fuckin shops round town, a real Indian from comics and TV and America ... Like Sitting Bull...’; he imagines his strong features and mentally commands his cronies in the bar: ‘Look at me’ (OWW, 65-66). A cultural context or history in which this vanity and violence might be legitimized indeed seems elusive, and in that respect Beth’s denigration of her husband is sustained. But this paradigm, this stasis of female quiescence and resilience in the face of unproductive male aggression, isn’t the whole book: both not-warriorhood and warriorhood have further modalities, which have different relations to the past and different future prospects.

In the novel’s opening chapter, the reader has been alerted to Beth’s fear that her oldest son Nig is attempting to join the Brown Fists, the youth gang that operates in the area, presided over by an intimidating thug named Jimmy Bad Horse (the American Indian allusion thus again marking a fake, imported warriorhood). Halfway through the book he is allowed in, having fought it out with another prospective member, and is drawn into ‘The house of angry belonging’, to quote Duff’s chapter title. The sheer aggression of gang culture is disturbing, and the group displays the destructive habits of the community in a more pronounced form, yet paradoxically also seems closer to Maori warriorhood, in their values of staunchness and belonging, and the emulation of moko designs in facial tattoos. For Duff, however, the fact that moko were etched and not tattooed is a difference rather than a mere discrimination: Nig has a nightmare in which he meets his ancestors, real warriors with exquisite, deeply carved faces, who dissociate themselves from him and declare him a coward, as they bash to death a figure he recognizes as himself (OWW, 181-182, 188-89). The ‘lightly marked’ character of imitation moko stands for the hollowness of the gang’s ‘belonging’, that is all too manifest as they take on repossession and debt collection work, dealing brutally with
members of their own community unable to keep up TV repayments, in
the interests of ‘some white prick with a business in town.’ The gang,
then, marks a more extreme form of the degeneracy with which Jake has
already been charged: while he takes the name of warriorhood in vain
through his wife-beating, the Brown Fists are rendered as head-kicking
mercenaries against their own people. Their perversion of any legitimate
meaning of ‘belonging’ is exemplified by the fact that Nig joins the gang
on the day of his sister Grace’s tangi (the customary funeral), but is
refused permission by Jimmy Bad Horse to attend, on the grounds that he
is now among his real ‘bruthas’ and sisters: ‘This is your fuckin family.
From now on, this is where you’re at’ (OWW, 140). Just as the gang abso-
lutely rejects familial affection, and is rejected absolutely in the novel’s
moral scheme, Jake’s corruption is epitomized by his inability to attend
the tangi either, though his reasons include both his unwillingness to
weep and his alienation from Maori culture.

By this point, however, the novel is not presenting a desolate stasis, but
a triangular dynamism between the Brown Fists, seemingly wholly
absorbed in self-destruction, the men who are positioned more ambiguously,
if only because they’re placed at some remove from the extreme degener-
acy of the gang, and the women who are on the point of translating their
perception of right and wrong into action toward the reconstruction of the
community. Conscience and consciousness intervenes, for instance, when
Jake is upbraided for failing to make it to the funeral.

I don’t like all that speeches and singing fuckin hymns stuff, thas why I wasn’t
there, Jake hearing himself explain without consciously deciding he would. Adding,
all that bawlin, howlin stuff... Mista, that’s what they have a blimmin funeral for
– so ya c’n cry. What, ya can’t cry, ya can’t show ya not tough at your own kid’s
tangi? (OWW, 146)

Jake is tempted to hit the woman but sits down and drinks: something
she says gets to him. This moment of perception indicates that Jake isn’t
immutably himself, but he must be distanced further from moral legiti-
mony and sociality before he can be redeemed. Grace, the daughter whose
funeral is referred to, had committed suicide, hanging herself from a tree
on the Tramberts’ land; she was prompted to do this not so much by the
generalized despair that led her to glue-sniffing, but because she was
raped at night in her own bed. She thinks her father did it, and leaves a
note to this effect; when Jake is confronted with this, as he brings a group
of friends home for another party, he is swiftly ostracized, and finds
himself homeless on the street. What I take to be crucial here, is not that
his kind of not-warriorhood is marked by the total negation of familial
affection that incest signifies, but that Grace is clearly mistaken. Although
Duff has opted to make the issue obscure, to the extent that many readers
assume that Jake is in fact the perpetrator, the doubt needs to be there
because it's in his own mind: the effect of alcohol is such that he simply
doesn't know what he might have done or not done. In response to the
charge that he overemphasized incest, Duff responded in a debate in the
Listener that 'the father didn't do it, and I should know, I wrote the bloody
thing', but it isn't necessary to depend upon his declared intentions to
clarify the issue; the reference in the text preceding the description of the
rape to a visitor who says 'Come and giz your Uncle Bully a hug, girl' is
telling, especially since the man is described as Grace's 'false uncle'. The
adjective here suggests that the relationship, like the siblingship of the
gang, amounts to a lie rather than a classificatory fiction.

The novel proceeds through crude but powerful juxtapositions. As Jake
is banished, even by his old drinking mates, the experience of the tangi
renews Beth's engagement with Maori culture; initially alienated and sus­
picious of official initiatives such as the kohanga reo language program,
she is won over by the sheer power of the elders' oratory and movement,
the force of emotion at the tangi, and the sense of belonging engendered
through collective grief. At the same time as her son Nig is being inducted
into the gang, she is acquiring a new sense of racial pride, which is trans­
lated later into a recuperative mission. Her household, shorn of its patri­
arch and his eldest son, becomes first a drop-in centre where street kids
can always get a feed, and then, with the help of her home village, a
centre for projects, for teaching skills, and for raising money to do more.
As the elders and chief from her group come to speak and perform haka,
the practical activities are augmented with a sense of history and pride
that is articulated with the warrior spirit of the past yet dissociated from
its contemporary distortions. As Beth had promised herself, she would
give her kids their 'rightful warrior inheritance... Not attacking, violent
pride but heart pride' (OWW, 167). The chief alternately thrills those who
come to listen to him about tales of ancient struggles and the noble past,
but he also berates them about their cowardly beer-drinking, and encour­
ages them to uplift themselves:

And boy was he laying it on the line toem: tellin em to jack their ideas up. Ta stop
being lazy. Ta stop blamin the Pakeha for their woes even if it was the Pakeha much
to blame. So what? he asked them in his booming voice that didn't need no
microphone. Do I accuse the storm that destroys my crops? ...No! No, I don't accuse
the storm. I clean up. THEN I PLANT AGAIN! (OWW, 182)

Though associated with the strength and authority of male elders, the
fashioning of an authentic and legitimate warriorhood is thus presented
as an effort of women: of saintly Beth, of her friend Mavis, who rallies
people with her singing, and of her female kin. The symmetries persist to
the book's ending as the elevation and reconstruction of Pine Block is
proportionate with a heightening savagery among the gangs, which is
consummated in Nig's death. The brief concluding chapter surveys the
funeral, attended both by his comrades and the community of the righteous, and Beth is composed in her grief, as if this death, unlike the others, has a certain necessity; as if its tragedy illuminates the opposed path that must be taken. In the meantime, homeless Jake has made a kind of friendship with a street kid, that seems to have provided him with a paternal emotional bond of the kind he never sustained with his own kids, and he is hidden away at the fringe of the funeral, with this boy, weeping as he was unable to do before, because his toughness and not-warriorhood excluded it. What appears as his disgrace is thus in fact a path away from his reputation as a tough chief, and toward some recovered childlike innocence.

The fact that the book only hints at the form of Jake’s rehabilitation marks something of a fissure, that disrupts the neat progress and sentimentality of the book’s conclusion. It’s explained that Jake’s dissociation from Maori tradition derives partly from the fact that he comes from a family descended from a prisoner of war; they were therefore slaves who were constantly abused and oppressed. Beth is taken by surprise when Jake suddenly reveals this, after many years of marriage, and wonders, had she known, if she perhaps might have helped him or understood him better (OWW, 102-3). Hence, while the warrior past is ennobled at the novel’s recuperative moment, and is shown to be something that needs only to be translated into the present in the appropriate way, as redemptive spiritual struggle rather than toughness, this earlier passage deprives Maori sociality of its privileged status. There seems, at one point, to be reason and resistant ebullience in the pub culture and Jake’s fighting: his renown as a Pine Block rumbler negates the social exclusion he suffered as a child, and locates discrimination and oppression as much in his own background and tradition as in his relation to Pakeha. This displacement can be compared to that at the book’s beginning, which occludes the question of land and dispossession that is pivotal for many indigenous narratives, by situating the characters in a state-owned space abstracted from a white man’s estate. If this evocation of a site of welfare, licenses both the negative imagery and the reconstruction that redresses it, Jake’s history rationalizes his non-nativist, non-traditionalist construction of self by treating his constitutive oppression as one internal to Maori society rather than a product of the colonial encounter.

As I observed earlier, liberal public discourses concerning indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand are structured largely by a primitivism that has been reaccentuated in environmentalist and New Age terms, but which conforms logically with a much deeper primitivist tradition in western thought. Just as the eighteenth century native American’s uncorrupted happiness was proportionate with the absence of commerce and luxury in his unpolished societies, the spirituality and pervasive relatedness constitutive of Maori and Aboriginal cultures can be juxtaposed with the wastelands of industrial modernism or the depthless simulacra
of postmodernist consumerism. The burden that these appreciative yet appropriative discourses foist upon indigenous peoples is one of archaism: the truth of their cultures inheres in their radical opposition to modernity, and indigenous modernity can thus only be a contradictory and inauthentic location.

This is all widely attested to. It's also apparent that some indigenous cultural producers – artists, novelists, photographers, performers – have capitalized effectively on the dominant society's primitivism, and re-appropriated and manipulated its terms through nativist and traditionalist discourses that have frequently enhanced their prestige and legitimacy. Let me consider what options are available to those who choose not to do this, who resist the restrictive elements of the idealization. What they have aimed to do, in effect, is ask the dominant culture to understand them and appreciate them as they are, rather than as they might be imagined to have been once.

Some exciting contemporary Aboriginal work can be seen to effect this by presenting an Aboriginality – and particular Aboriginal lives that resist subsumption to a generic ethnicity – that is profoundly historicized. I am thinking particularly of Ian Abdulla’s engaging simulations of children’s art, that narrate aspects of his youthful experience on a mission station, and Robert Campbell’s less personal and more historical paintings, that depict the Aboriginal tent embassy and other markers in black history, and remind us that apartheid practices, such as roping off sections for Aborigines in cinemas, were part of Australian life up until very recent times. Maori artists doing similar things include Para Matchitt, whose work commemorates the early twentieth century prophetic movement of Rua Kenana, and Emily Karaka, whose thick and tortured oil compositions index rather than signify the suffering of the colonized.

In the domain of performance rather than painting, and in a comic rather than a tragic register, this historicization of identity is also effected in Bran nue dae, a very funny and very sexy musical written by Jimmy Chi of the Aboriginal community of Broome, in northwestern Australia. In a range of parodic and amusing but sometimes also haunting songs, the story works through mission station experiences, presided over by terrifyingly orderly German Lutherans, and presents a series of people coming back together in their country. Tadpole has been in and out of gaol; young Willie has been brought up on the mission and knows little of bush life. They meet up with an urban dropout, Marijuana Annie, and her German hippy boyfriend Slippery, both of whom discover that they are in fact part-Aborigines who had been fostered into white society during the notorious period of assimilation in the 1950s and 1960s. Slippery, in turns out, is the son of the German missionary: ‘Ich bin Ine Aborigine!!’ he proclaims, mimicking to ambiguous effect Kennedy’s famous assertion in Berlin. Bran nue dae defines Aboriginality through the experience of assimilation and its rejection, as something that can be recovered through
self-identification, rather than a quantity that ‘authentic’ Aborigines possess more of than others. Through its north Australian kriol, the performance had an unmistakable cultural location, but appealed to commonalities and shared predicaments, some of which (to do with drugs and drink) are associated through the character of Marijuana Annie with urban youth rather than one ‘race’ or the other. As Tadpole says, ‘He’s a Christian, I’m a Christian, she’s a Christian, We all bloody Christian’. Against the humourlessness of colonialist and nativist codifications of identity alike, Chi’s work conveys truths of biography and identity that stabilized cultures cannot.

Compared with these works, Once were warriors does not come across as a work that finds a new language of identity. Its shortcoming as a political intervention arises from what I would see as a literary shortcoming, that is, the equivocation and weakness of the ending. Duff imagines many Pine Blockers seeing the light, rallying around Beth, turning their fists into willing hands, turning from glue sniffing or whatever to renovating the local community hall; ‘Chief was giving his usual oral history lesson as men and youths of both sexes hammered and sawed on the latest community project, a changing room and shower block on the donated Trambert land for the newly ploughed and sown rugby field’ (OWW, 194). Like the dutiful inhabitants of the missionary technical school, these rehabilitated people seem just too pure, too much like Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. It’s not that I would dispute Duff’s view that the Pine Block youth are better off playing rugby, but that the future that is imagined is too bland and wholesome to go any way toward overpowering and superseding the horror of the present. While some of the other work I referred to, displaced the noble savage with an oppressed and scarred but also a cheeky, ebullient, and empowered figure, Duff’s ‘once were’ logic inverts the idealization and – despite the novel’s dynamic tensions – remains caught within this moment of reaction. Duff is clearly especially concerned to contradict the Maori propensity to blame the Pakeha, and the rugby field is at the end made on land that virtually the only named white man in the book has donated. Mr Trambert is a benign and benevolent observer, and one who responds with help when Maori show that they can help themselves. As an allegory of race relations, this really won’t do; but if Once were warriors has limitations both as a cultural intervention and a literary work, I would affirm at the same time that its dispersal of the meanings of not-warriorhood implies identities and futures beyond its neat story of redemption and advancement. Moreover, the sheer force of the book’s negativity makes the operation of anti-idealization visible, and thus potentially redundant. Duff has certainly given us a text that needs to be read and argued about; he may well also have shown the necessity of a step beyond negation, a step that was not available to the novel itself.
NOTES


2. See for example the Listener and TV Times, June 10, July 11, July 29, August 19, August 26, September 16, 1991; and Peter Beatson's review in Landfall 179 (1991), 365-368.

3. Alan Duff, Once were warriors (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991; orig. Tandem Press, New Zealand, 1990); hereafter cited in the text as OWW.


5. Some of their work is reproduced in the Australian National Gallery's catalogue, Flash pictures (Canberra: ANG, 1992).

6. See, for example, Rangihiroa Panoho's catalogue, Whatu aho rua: a weaving together of traditional and contemporary taonga (Wanganui: Sarjeant Gallery, 1991).

7. The script and lyrics were published as Bran nue dae by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles (Sydney/Broome: Currency Press and Magabala Books, 1991); see also Tom Zubrycki's film of the same title, released by Ronin, Canberra.
By now, I should know how to do it. Begin.

I look at the sheets of paper in front of me, blank except for: ‘Bent over the lush grass’, on one. ‘Does she see the shadow pass?’ on another. The sheet right on top is a pale, menacing yellow. It has blue lines running across it, straight and rigid. I write in one long, narrow compartment,

If I could

and I falter. I look out of the window, waiting.

I am a retired salesman. They had better names for it; for once I did not have the last, or best, word.

I am a poet. You will notice that I do not say retired once again, in spite of the evidence.

When we moved to this house five years ago, the house which holds my life-savings in its solid heart of brick and stone, I had my desk placed right by the window.

The small garden, which was nothing but mud and weeds then, is my wife’s territory. She has spent a lifetime growing minute, self-contained gardens in pots. When she saw the small stretch of land in front of the house, she didn’t even want to go inside. ‘I won’t have a single pot here,’ she said. ‘No more pretend-gardens in the balcony on the seventh floor. Everything I grow now will dig its roots deep into the soil.’

I too made my promises and resolutions. Not to anyone but myself though; I have learnt, by necessity, to exercise my skill in private.

Five years later, Sarala’s garden in no longer empty. The grass, the hedges, the green non-flowering plants she prefers, grow as if the earth pushed them upward. Even the twin trees she has planted, a neem and a peepal, are adolescent saplings. Already the patch below them is shady. They are ringed with clover and intricate little bursts of maidenhair fern.

Sarala’s enemies are familiar, everyday creatures. The sparrows that pull apart the tendermost tips of plants; the occasional field rat that strays into the garden in the dead of night. My enemy is a chameleon. I have never seen him, but I know him well. He lurks behind my chair, only a word away. He is a dull, stupid animal given to platitudes.

Words still move me to tears. I am luckier than most people, I know. If I were to explain the last forty years, I could, if I wanted, blot out the long
meetings on how to sell more bulbs and tubelights. The two slim but hard cover books on my shelf will speak for me. So will the short biography I wrote of a little known poet from Kerala. He lived in a small village of fishermen all his life. He wrote of thatched huts that let in the rain and the sharp, pungent smell of fish drying in the sun. He wrote of boat after boat setting out on a moonlit sea. But his sea was a choppy, awesome stranger, a hard taskmaster. His fishermen never sang of happy times.

I wrote about this simple, earthy poet the year I retired. That was, I think, the happiest year of my life.

That was also when Sarala and I began all over again, in a new house, in a new town. We began our second lives; she at her muddy patch, spade in hand; and I at my desk, cleared at last of everything but pure, unadulterated poetry.

By midmorning, I can no longer put off the blank sheets of paper that Sarala has laid out on the table. For a few moments before I begin my day’s work, several decades roll one into the other and I look at my life as if I were someone else. I see myself as I used to be. I see the years when I would pick up the pen every night, trying to make a beginning. The middle is more friendly.

I went home from the stale, smoky, tubelit office and struggled, like a fish thrown ashore, till a single word sucked me in like a gentle, blessed wave. I wrote page after page, and it lay before me as if its pattern was predestined, a complete, whole poem.

There is something else that grows inside now. The ulcer in my stomach blocks the way of all nourishment. My own words no longer move me. I stumble on to something I wrote ten, fifteen years ago and surprise myself. (I ration these deliberate forays into the past.)

The lyrical image gets stuck somewhere in the throat. By the time I have it on my lips, guide it down the pen to paper, it is cold. Brittle, insubstantial. An old man’s nonsense rhyme.

Sarala does not understand poetry. But she likes to hear me read it out – or used to, in the days when we still thought marriage meant doing things together. Now, in the evenings, we eat early – boiled vegetables, rice, a glass of cold milk each. She does not have an ulcer but she shares my diet. Our dinners are austere, serious affairs. If we had children, perhaps the small talk of other households, grandchildren, other people’s private sorrows, would have filled our spare, half empty plates.

After dinner Sarala sits on one of the two big armchairs in the living-room and puts on her thin, gold-rimmed glasses.

Her face is round, and so is her body. She wears dull quiet colours, muddy browns and dusty greys. She peers into her book like a wise old owl. Her book – she looks at the same one most nights – lists seeds and seasons for planting and pruning.

I have my reading to get on with too. I try not to read during the day – you learn that if you have walked a tightrope for a lifetime – and you
make choices. You can do this or that. Too many drugs clog the intestines. The ulcer has only reached the tip of my oesophagus. It waits at the door to my stomach, cunning and patient.

The other night I dreamt I was in a windowless, bare hall lit by harsh, merciless floodlights. The walls were lined with shiny mirrors that made the hall even brighter. I felt the cold sweat pouring out of my armpits and down the sides of my body. I ran around, looking for a small window or at least a crack, but I found nothing. Then I took a deep breath and felt my feet lift off the ground, inch by inch, till my head brushed against the ceiling. I could see nothing now; everything was one big burst of white, dowdy light. The ceiling felt like melting wax. I pushed my head through it, then my shoulders. I flew into the cool night sky, floating aimlessly.

I don’t like this dreaming of the past though. I woke up in a sweat, and found myself in the familiar, reassuring darkness, Sarala snoring by my side. I willed myself to sleep again.

What I would like to dream is this: I stand on the shore of a vast, choppy sea, and the sight fills me with a strange longing. Before I know what I am doing, I bend over, pick up the sea and shake out the folds and wrinkles. When I lay it back it is a clean, thick sheet of smooth, glowing water.

Sarala has an old gardener to help her three times a week. Bent over my sheet of paper, my pen hesitating between the words magical and enchanted, I hear their low voices, exchanging professional secrets. They make a good team. She is the navigator, he the oarsman. Or I could say, she is the poet, he the word. Their alliance is blessed by hardy offspring, mostly commonplace foliage that thrives despite changes in weather.

Sarala does not believe in newfangled insecticides and hormonal growth helpers. But her ferns are a luminous green. Little black dots line their undersides at regular intervals. Her pale pink anthurium has a corn-like centre-point, framed by skin that looks delicate, but is thick and enduring.

In the Introduction to my first volume of poetry – the result of ten years’ work – the critic who agreed to write a short note on my work described me as an organic poet. ‘The fragile lyrical image is firmly bound to earth in these poems,’ he wrote.

What he did not write in the Introduction he said to me: ‘Look, there is some congenital weakness in your poetry. Your poems remind me of a beautiful clockwork doll that drones the same mild, soft-spoken complaint day after day.’

We have no children, but Sarala does not seem to miss them. She has covered one corner of the garden with spider plants. ‘I know they are common,’ she says. ‘But they fill up all the empty spaces so quickly!’ Her other favourite is the portulaca. As it creeps along, the vine grows and spreads, flowering along the way.

I look at the nearly empty sheet before me.
Tell me, koel, when you heard him last,
My little boy in the wooded past—

I see the fruit of tired loins. The images I have hoarded over the years, like
tripping embryos, are soft and rotten.

Sarala's wards are also in danger. For the past week, I hear cries of alarm
from the garden every morning. She sounds like a small animal in pain.
'It's been here again,' she calls to me. 'See what that rat has done to my
rubber plant.' Even before I go out to her, I can see her plump face
screwed up, like a child about to cry.

This rodent is no ordinary enemy. He picks on the most lush, the most
secund of her plants. He digs deep into the soil and pulls wildly at the
roots. He leaves no tracks but Sarala and the gardener find the uprooted,
torn shreds of stalks and leaves every day. He does not eat any of it. It is
a song of pure destruction.

A week later, the suspense freezes my already vacillating pen. I can no
longer pretend to write. I know that if I look up, I will see Sarala's red,
swollen eyes, her thick, chapped fingers slowly conducting a burial of the
night's casualties.

I put away my sheets of paper and buy a wooden trap. The first night
I fill it with cheap sweets from the market. The rodent ignores it com­
pletely.

'Let's give him what he wants,' I tell Sarala, and I fill up the trap with
roots and leaves, organic offerings.

One more night. Neither of us needs the alarm clock to wake up. I rush
out into the garden before Sarala. I see the trap, the drying leaves and
roots clumped together like a nest, but no rodent. He has not been fooled
by the ageing poet.

'What do we do?' wails Sarala. I make another trip to the market. I buy
poison this time, six packets of it, ten grams in each.
I line the floor of the trap with cardboard and empty the packets, enough
to kill five rats, on to the board.
The next day, I remove the untouched poison and summon Sarala.
'We can't be so obvious,' I tell her.
We pack the poison into crisp, freshly fried vadas. The three big, doughy
blobs shine in the dark and stain the wooden trap with oil.

That night I don't get into bed at all. I sit by the window, listening care­
fully for sounds other than Sarala's gentle snoring. Even my imagination
fails me: I don't hear a thing.

Some days later, I realize I have a mission at last. I will see him, confront
him and conquer him. He is no elusive, disappearing image. He is a hairy,
solid beast, a creature of blood and slime.
I spend the night outside, waiting. The whispery rustling of the leaves
fills me with a childish fear. I can't remember when I was out in a garden
at night before. Before the ulcer perhaps? Or the years of racing between bright, glaring tubelights and pages of melancholy poetry?
I feel the goose-pimples on my bare arms. I could go inside the house and get myself a sweater, but I am afraid of being cheated again.
I lie instead near the thick bush of creeping jasmine and invoke my familiar, wordy saviours.

*The heaving roses of the hedge are stirred*
*By the sweet breath of summer.*

I remember this. I also remember:

*I have loved flowers that fade*
*Within whose magic tents*
*Rich hues have marriage made*
*With sweet unmemorised scents.*

A thin filmy cloud passes slowly across my eyes, now myopic with age. It’s too late to disentangle vanity and vocation, desire and depth. All the images the jasmine evokes in me – a reluctant salesman, an almost-poet, a sterile householder – are borrowed. I have written for a lifetime about petals kissed by dewdrops and the shy, unseen blossom in the heart of leafy bushes. I have never heard a koel sing. Sarala is no lotus but a thick-skinned yam that grows coarse and pungent under the moist soil.

Towards morning, a faint but persistent rustling and scurrying wakes me up. My arms and legs are stiff and cold on the wet grass. My head feels as if it is tightly wrapped in a thick fog.

I lie here, my body frozen and immobile. But I can hear everything. I can hear her enemy, now mine, at work with his long, sharp teeth. Chopping, cutting, laying waste our hard earned patch of green.

As he bites and spits, I can hear him mocking an old man’s dreams. Fame, wisdom, love, the nectar-laden words of a patriarch.

I see nothing, but I sense him moving near my head. He pauses, as if to take measure of his opponent. Then I hear him again, but he is no longer in a hurry. He takes his time, careful to pull apart every root and leaf in the long row of verdant, fecund spider plants.

He is so absorbed, so inspired, that he is still at it when Sarala finds the two of us. She has a large stick in her hand which she brings down on his bristly back. She gets him the first time.

I have always thought rats squeal, but this one grunts, a deep, angry growl that grows and grows out of his stomach.

I can feel the thick, sticky slime of his blood, his last poem, spurting on to my numb, outstretched hands. He has left nothing for me to do but write an epitaph.
Peter Bakowski

THE STUTTERING BOY

He's been asked a question.

He herds the pigs
that are his fingers
into the inkwell.

He stands,
a wrinkled sack of discomfort.

Syllables prowl
the wet jail of his mouth
awaiting
their
certain slaughter.

The class
look out the windows,
at their pencils,
think of the ants
they burnt at lunch-time
with their magnifying glasses.

LULLABY OF ST. KILDA

The moon has eyelashes
called moonbeams.
Cats have always been
foremen of the night.
Windows that squeak when you open them
are poems to mice.
Clouds are sheep
eating the grass of the sky.
Fish tickle the ocean
and it goes running to the shore.
Dogs bark their envy of the stars.
And when men and women laugh –

diamonds grow bigger
under the soil.

BONDI AFTERNOONS
– for Yusuke Keida

An ant walks over your pink letter
and I’m listening to Nico’s ‘Chelsea Girl’ album –
it speaks of rain and afternoons, rendezvous and loss.
Birds fly, men look out at ships,
curtains flap, a woman is buying shoes.
I hear children and seagulls squeal
the clock leisurely licks its paws.
There is rust and washing and tin chimneys.
It’s timeless, lazy, beautiful.
An acoustic guitar and mist can still
break your heart.

IN PRAISE OF MOVEMENT
– for Krystyna

I bought
these potatoes last week –
they’re starting
to go green:
If I just leave
my life
it will do the same.
I’ve got to circulate it
down the streets
down the telephone receiver
into the
firemen’s net of friendships.
It’s time to kiss
the girls
luck
bread
the water tap
the roof
your reading glasses.

I look out the back door:
I can see
cats
white clouds
traffic
birds flying –
No living thing knows
the name of the game
or the stakes
but they are all going
somewhere.

Deal me in.

THE OLD WOMEN OF BRIA MARKET,
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

The old women of the market
possess knowledge:
it’s in their wood-knot eyes
it’s in their easy, toothless smiles
it lies deep in their faces,
like last water cracked in the river bed.

They know the sun
they are not foolish in its presence.
They sit on their low stools of bamboo and hide
and brush away time as if it were a fly.
They sit in their folded wings of cloth
serene as desert birds descending
to the jewel that is water.

They sell dollops of peanut paste
which they deftly wrap and tie in clean, waxy palm leaves.
They sell sugar cubes stacked in playful geometry,
they sell charcoaled fish – fly mad and tree trunk black,
they sell cooking oil in old perfume bottles
of European origin.
They sit behind large enamel buckets
filled with roast monkey chests complete with paws –
now forever your mind carries the image
of oil-reddened monkey paws surreally sticking out of
innocently flower-painted enamel buckets.

And the old women of the market
sit and wait, as the sun walks across the world,
wait for a customer
to cool their palm with a coin;
patient
like the village river.
MARGARET HARRIS

Theatre of Women

The four women sat in a circle and passed round the libation cup. Each drank a little from it and then Calla, who was the last to hold it, poured the remainder into the tall green plant which rested in the middle of the floor. Honey, spring water, herbs, they had become accustomed to the taste and the plant seemed to appreciate it. Rose and Sarah thought the leaves greener and glossier after each ritual watering.

Then the singing began, Olivia taking the lead, followed after a few notes by Rose, whilst Sarah contented herself with a low chanting background sound. Calla accompanied on her lyre. At least she liked to think of it as a lyre, though in reality it more resembled a curious zither. She had come across it in an old junk shop, almost hidden under a pile of tattered magazines, filthy and forlorn looking. After thorough cleaning and restringing it took on new life and Calla loved the feel of it under her hand as she plucked the strings.

The singing over, the women began to make preparations for their journey into the night. They needed a special form of disguise in which to accomplish their task or drama.

It was well after midnight when Keith was attacked. They sprang on him from behind, two pinioning his arms and another thrusting a sacklike object over his head. He struggled violently but his assailants obviously knew all there was to know about Judo and Karate and they administered some skilful chops which hurt him considerably.

Eventually he stopped struggling. Perhaps better to be calm, otherwise they might decide to stick a knife into him. He wondered if he had been a woman if they might have been intent on rape. As it was they laid him down in the middle of Barnes Common and two of them sat on him.

Having received a fairly violent blow on the head he at first wondered if he was imagining things. The plaintive sound of music (could it be a harp?) and then the singing voices. If only they would take this thing off my head, he thought, I can’t concentrate, I can scarcely breathe.

Then the singing ceased and hands were pulling at him. Pulling off his jacket and warm sweater, even his shirt. And now fingers were busy with the zipper on his trousers. What the hell, he thought, what a way to die, frozen to death on Barnes Common.
A sinister thought struck him. Could it be, surely not, did these men mean to rape him? Forgetting his resolution he began to struggle again. Then he heard the voices, 'Leave his underpants Rose and his socks.'

'You’re too soft Calla. After what happened to you, you should want him stripped of his very skin.'

A third voice spoke. 'No that’s enough. Now the rending of garment. Sarah, here, give me a hand.'

'But you’re women,' cried Keith in amazement. 'You’re women. How could you do such a thing?'

At that moment someone removed the covering from his head and he had a vision of four black clad figures, two of them engaged in ripping his favourite shirt to shreds. Then they were running, one brandishing his jacket, another his sweater and a third his trousers. The fourth carried something, he could not make out what it was. The torn shirt fluttered at his feet and he picked it up in a dazed attempt to gain some warmth from its tattered remains. He would like to have run after his attackers but his head was smarting and his legs felt distinctly odd. His shoes had been removed but he was glad to find them lying a little way off (possibly left by the one called Calla?). He sped homeward, praying he might be taken for an eccentric jogger.

'Well that’s four we’ve done,' Olivia said, 'three more to go.'

'There should really be seven of us to make the thing absolutely right, I suppose,' Rose remarked.

'We were lucky to get the four of us,' Sarah said.

'Does it really have to be seven?' Calla queried, 'wouldn’t just one more be enough?'

'Of course it must be seven,' Olivia told her severely, 'we agreed about that.'

'The magic number,' Rose chimed in.

'The seven deadly sins.'

'Never light a bonfire until there are seven standing around it.'

'The seven Russian riders.'

'The seven names for God.'

'Snow White and the seven dwarfs.'

'Now we are seven.'

'All right,' Calla agreed, sighing, 'you’ve made your point. Seven it has to be.'

She went on, shivering a little. 'I’m glad there weren’t seven that night. Four was quite enough. And there wasn’t any magic about them.' Rose went to her and held her for a moment.

'And you’re the one who said we should leave his underpants and socks,' chided Sarah, 'after what these bastards did to you, you should be carrying around a horsewhip.'

'Or a branding iron,' said Olivia, 'though I realise it could be difficult.'
Calla laughed tremulously. 'I'm the small one of the group,' she said, 'if anyone was to carry either a horsewhip or a branding iron it should be you Rose.'

'True,' Rose agreed, 'five feet eleven might get away with it.'

The four laughed together. They were comrades, they had each suffered, they wanted revenge, though it was Calla, the player of the lyre, the most gentle of the quartet, who was not at times so sure as the others.

Keith was sauntering along by the embankment a couple of days later when he spied the two tramps. One was sporting his sweater and the other was togged up in his jacket. There was no doubt about it. He approached them. Leaning over them he was assailed by a strong smell of cider, or possibly a mixture of cider and meths.

'Look here,' he addressed them, 'that's my jacket you're wearing there, and my sweater. Where did you get them from?'

The tramps looked truculent and defensive and he hastily produced three one pound coins from his pocket. 'You can keep the clothes,' he told them, 'but you must let me know who gave them to you.'

They looked at one another and then one of them reached out and grabbed the money.

'Come from the Sally Shop,' they told him, 'they gives things to down-an-outs see. That's where we got 'em guv.'

With the help of another couple of pounds he managed to persuade them to show him where the shop was. They became quite friendly and expounded on the merits of the Salvation Army. When they arrived there the woman Keith saw was not helpful. 'A lot of people donate clothing,' she told Keith, 'I really wouldn't know who brought in these particular articles.' He pressed her but to no avail. He looked around for his trousers but they were not to be seen. On looking round he found the tramps had made off whilst he was conversing, perhaps uncertain as to whether he would demand his money back after drawing a blank. He went home and pondered over a large whisky.

Sarah, the designer, rising steadily in the large firm where she worked, amid the arrogant males in the business, sat at home making the new head. It was of papier mâché, undoubtedly the head of a man. It was the fourth of this nature she had contrived. It gave her a savage pleasure to push and prod at it as she worked.

She recalled the night she had been mugged by the three thugs. Not content with removing her wallet (and it had been fairly well stacked) they had grabbed for her jewellery, bruising her as they ripped off the gold chain bearing the scarab beetle. Her lucky charm, she thought bitterly, not much good to me then. But it was the bracelet her father had given her she really minded about. His last gift to her before he died, loved and
cherished, and then borne away by these louts. She gave the head a final pummel and ran her nails down one of its papier mâché cheeks.

She relished the drama in which she and the other women were engaged but she also realised her attackers had made a mark upon her which it might be difficult to totally erase. She always enjoyed the vicious rending of the men’s shirts (surrogate torsos). She worked steadily on.

A week later Keith was alerted when out walking with Terry. ‘Why that’s my suit in there,’ Terry cried in tones of amazement and rage, ‘it’s my suit.’ The two men were passing an Oxfam Shop at the time, where a rather dashing brown suit was displayed in the window marked at £12.

Terry rushed into the shop and purchased it. When questioned by Keith he would say nothing and refused to give any indication as to how the suit might have come to grace that particular window. The incident gave Keith food for thought. He himself had not mentioned to anyone that he had been attacked and debagged by women.

Olivia sang, her voice rising strong and pure. She was practising for the concert in which she had promised to take part on the following week. Once she had thought of taking up singing as a career but she had realised it would mean a lot of hard work which might lead to nothing. She had a sneaking feeling her voice was not quite good enough for her to make it to the top. And Olivia was ambitious, she sought the top of whichever ladder came her way. She blessed the friend who had suggested she could rise high in the world of advertising, with her talent for word-making, lyricism, slick rhyming, slogans. She was good at it she thought, it came to her like a duck to water. Already she was high on this particular ladder to success and she had no intention of slowing down.

She sang on. Thank the lord her vocal chords had not been permanently damaged when she was attacked. She was glad the beasts had left her with scars lower down, which she could cover up. For an advertising executive one had to look smart and attractive. At least that was essential for a woman, men might get away with less. She wondered if Sarah had almost finished the fourth head, so that they could conduct the usual launching ceremony. The ceremony always gave her a curious thrill.

Another stroke of luck came for Keith when he was attending a friend’s wedding reception about a fortnight later. A somewhat bizarre incident occurred. He was standing around consuming champagne and sausage on a stick when a little mousy man appeared wearing a brilliant waistcoat and vivid tie under his dark jacket.

Another small man of pugilistic appearance made an immediate beeline for the first and hustled him into a corner near to Keith. ‘That happens to be my waistcoat and tie you are wearing,’ he accused the little mousy man who looked terrified. A lengthy conversation ensued and Keith learnt that...
the waistcoat and tie had been purchased in a Unicef Shop, the brilliant colours having attracted the purchaser.

This third incident drew Keith to approach the men. He told them he might be able to throw some light on the mystery and asked them to join him for a drink the following evening. He then telephoned Terry and arranged for him to come along as well. When the four were seated at a quiet table in the pub, he broached the subject which he had hitherto kept secret. Mentioning strange goings on on Barnes Common he gradually got Terry and the small pugilistic chap to admit they had suffered the same ignominious treatment as himself. He explained it was the coincidence of their respective clothing appearing in a Salvation Army Shop, an Oxfam Shop and a Unicef Shop that had given him the clue. The little mousy man listened with open mouth as the other three recounted their experiences. 'I should have died,' he kept saying, 'I know I should have died.'

The other two seemed glad to be able to unburden themselves and spoke freely of the outrage. They admitted to having been debagged (Terry had even had his underpants removed) and talked of the humiliation as well as of the chill wind on the Common. The pugilistic man, who answered to the name of Leo, explained that his aunt Clare had especially made the brilliant waistcoat for him and given him the tie to go with it, so he had been in no doubt that the articles were his. The mousy man, Hugh, said meekly he had, of course, returned them to their rightful owner. A small amount of money had changed hands.

All three spoke of the tearing into strips of their shirts by the women attackers. 'Vicious they were,' said Terry, 'talk about dismemberment. There was scarcely a scrap of my shirt left.' Leo agreed wholeheartedly and Keith remembered clutching his shredded garment to him in an effort to keep warm.

They all spoke of the weird singing and chanting they had heard and the playing of some strange instrument. All agreed something had to be done.

Calla was getting ready to go to the Karate Class she still attended now and again with the other three women. They had previously gone once or even twice a week but now they were all so accomplished in this particular art they had cut down. It was at one of these classes they had met and, taking a liking to one another, had met for drinks and coffee afterwards. Gradually they had built up confidence in one another and as their friendship developed they had told the others of their unhappy experiences at the hands of men.

Calla felt vastly inferior to the other three. They seemed so clever to her, so brilliant, one working in advertising, one in designing and the other running an estate agency. She herself worked in a shoeshop, humbly placing shoes on unknown feet, and thinking herself lucky to have a job at all in these days.
She recalled how kind they had been to her when she confided that she had been viciously raped by the four men. She still had nightmares about it, perhaps she always would have. How they had hurt her, like uncaring brutal animals they had been, using her like a block of petrified wood. And how soiled she had felt afterwards, how she had washed and scrubbed her body, in an effort to remove something of the shame and terror she had felt.

Olivia, Rose and Sarah were astonished that she had not gone to the police. She had tried to explain that she simply could not do this, could not undergo questioning, examination, people’s eyes upon her so soon after the outrage. She had crept back to her tiny flatlet like a wounded dog and stayed in bed for three days. Somehow, after that, she had struggled on, going to the shoeshop as usual, trying to push things to the back of her mind, at least in the daytime. At night she was unable to do this and purchased various kinds of night tablets from a pharmacist.

It was a relief to be able to confide in the other three. They had taken her under their wing. ‘I don’t believe I could ever actually use this Karate,’ she had told them, but they had been insistent that she carried on. And she had obeyed, doing all that they had told her to do. They were delighted that she had her lyre and she had learned to accompany them as Olivia and Rose sang and Sarah made her strange chanting sounds. ‘We are a team,’ they had told her and she was amazed and gratified that they treated her as an equal.

She listened to what they told her, she tried to enter into what they said, the dramas they acted out, though in her heart she was unsure of their logic. She acted with them, played her lyre, watched the dismembering of the men’s shirts. After all, they were all so much cleverer than she, they understood precisely what they were doing, they knew about myths and magic. And, most important, they had told her she was one of the team.

The men were laying plans.
‘There are three of us,’ Leo the pugilist said, ‘three men should be a match for four women any day.’
‘They seemed to be Karate experts of course,’ Keith remarked, remembering the vicious blows he had received.
‘I’ll say they were experts,’ amended Terry, ‘I was stiff for days after they banged me about.’
‘I should have died,’ said Hugh, saucer eyed.

The others had kept him in their ranks as they thought he might be useful as a decoy. They had not imparted this information to him as yet.
‘Tell you what,’ announced Leo, ‘I’ll get my cousin George to come along. He’d be more than a match for any of them.’

When he introduced them to George they saw what he meant. George was six feet five and broad with it. They were glad to enlist him after he said it might be a lark. Now they must wait and watch at Barnes Com-
mon. Hugh blanched and trembled when they told him his role as decoy but they assured him they would be on the attackers like strokes of lightning.

In the meantime the four women were launching the head Sarah had made. They sang as they sent it sailing down the Thames, so that the sound floated after it. ‘Gone to the home of the women,’ Olivia and Rose sang, ‘to the home of the jubilant women, the mighty and the gracious women.’ Sarah made her deep chanting sounds and Calla plucked dreamily at the strings of her lyre as she watched the head sail on and on before it began to tilt and disappear.

Afterwards Rose told the others she wished the men who had attacked her were drowned deep in the Thames. ‘I know I sound vicious,’ she said, ‘but if I hadn’t been tall and strong I believe they’d have raped me as well as doing a fierce job of mugging. Ugh! Men!’ She downed her vodka and lime in one gulp. ‘Let’s make it tomorrow night,’ she said, ‘there’s no moon. A good hunting night of drama.’ Calla shuddered a little. She was glad she would only be there to assist by playing on her lyre.

It was on the third night of watching that the men saw the attackers. They were all there, Keith, Terry, Leo, George and a terrified Hugh. As usual he was sent to saunter alone whilst the other four secreted themselves in various bushes. When they espied the black clad figures and saw them fling themselves upon a shrieking Hugh they sprang forth and overpowered the attackers. Placing sacks over their three heads (Keith happened to notice one was missing) they bore them away into the heart of the Common.

They had agreed that they would not strip the women as they themselves had been stripped but would merely frighten them by pulling their slacks to the ankles, holding the owners firmly and subjecting them to a severe talking to. Also it was agreed they must be made to promise that their outrageous sorties must cease.

Terry pulled down the jogging trousers of the first, Leo those of the second and Keith those of the third.

What had they expected to see? Silk lingerie, smooth tights, even a hint of suspender? All this to proclaim a degree of femininity as yet hidden by their previous assailants. What they did in fact see, by the light of George’s powerful torch, was a pair of scarlet boxer shorts worn over extremely hairy legs, a black jock strap topping undoubtedly muscled male limbs and another pair of hairy limbs encased in bright blue underpants bearing the message ‘Come and get me.’

Hugh whimpered in fright and the others sat back aghast. At the same moment one of their captives managed to free his head from the sacklike covering and the torch picked out a fiercely bearded face. Sitting astride them still, Terry and Leo unveiled the others, to bring to view a Yul
Brynner hairstyle over a twitching masculine snout and a spotty youth's features sporting a wispy moustache.

'But you're not women,' cried Terry, 'you're not the right ones.'

'We were sure you were women,' Keith told them, 'it was women we were after.'

'They attacked us,' Leo explained, 'they were vicious.'

'And they debagged them,' quavered Hugh, a fact that the others would not have mentioned.

George said nothing but continued to look menacing.

'Listen,' Keith told their captives, 'we mean you no harm. Just pull up your pants and go. We have no quarrel with you. If we set you free will you agree not to fight?'

'Blimey,' said the bearded man, 'we wouldn't fight you lot. You're all barmy.'

'Raving,' avowed the second, 'just let us up and we'll get back to normal life.' The third nodded his head in assent.

Hugh hid behind a bush and George stood to attention as Keith, Terry and Leo released them. For a moment they stood facing one another on the dark cold Common. Then in a flash the captives pulled up their respective trousers, extinguishing the shorts, jock strap and underpants and were off. Snatches of their conversation floated back over the still air.

'Bloody crackers – thought we were tarts – bloody insult – perverts – we'll have to change our gear.'

The five men left behind with one accord made for the nearest pub. They felt dejected and thirsty.

Meantime the four women sang and chanted and Calla played as the fifth head sailed down the river. Afterwards in their favourite coffee house they agreed it had been safer to abandon Barnes Common. 'After all four from there was enough,' Rose said, 'you never know, some louts could have ganged up on us, pals of the others I mean.'

'I was tired of the Common,' Olivia said, 'I like our new hunting theatre better.' Sarah nodded agreement.

Calla said meditatively, sipping her coffee, 'That's five we've done. Only two more to go. I wonder —'

'Well?' said Rose, 'what do you wonder little one?'

Calla stared deep into her cup. 'I wonder if you'll miss all the drama. Do you think you will? And will we still go on meeting as we do now?' She very much hoped they would say yes to the latter.

'I'm not sure,' Olivia answered, 'but yes I think I will miss it. The darkness, the planning, the excitement —'

'I'll miss it,' Rose agreed, 'there's been a sense of catharsis about it I do believe. And the singing, the floating heads, yes I'll miss it.'
We could still sing,' Calla suggested timidly. 'And Sarah you could make heads to sell. Women's heads I mean, to hang jewellery and things on. You're so clever I'm sure they'd sell.'

'Sarah shook her head. 'It wouldn't be the same at all,' she told Calla, 'I doubt if I'll ever make another head in my life. It's only for now. It's been essential for now of course, but that's all.' Olivia and Rose nodded, understanding.

'But we'll remain friends?' Calla said pleadingly, 'we've done so much together we wouldn't stop meeting would we?'

Olivia shrugged her shoulders. 'Who knows?' she said, 'after the final curtain comes down who can tell?'

'Why think about it now?' Sarah asked, 'we've still some way to go.'

'That's right,' Rose agreed, 'who's to say what's to happen in the future?' Then, noting something in Calla's face, she added, 'but I'm sure we'll have a get together at times Calla.'

They sipped their coffee reflectively.

'Tell you what,' Sarah announced, 'I'm going to make the seventh head, when we come to it, a perfect wonder, a work of art. Seeing it'll be for the last time.' She stared rapt at a point above their heads. 'Dismembered Orpheus, the floating head that sings. Only in this drama it sings for us women.'

Calla said nothing. Rose reached across and touched her hand lightly. 'Remember, it will sing for you Calla, maybe especially for you because you suffered most.'

'For what women have suffered down the centuries,' said Olivia. 'It will sing for all women, for all women everywhere.' Sarah and Rose nodded.

Calla, carried away by their certainty, wondered if perhaps she should offer to sacrifice her lyre. She had a sudden vision of it, following the seventh head into its watery grave. 'But I'll decide about that when the time comes,' she told herself, 'as Sarah said there's still some way to go. I don't have to make my mind up just yet.'

They ordered four more coffees and began to make plans for the next night of the play.
GORDON COLLIER

Multicultural Self-Definition and Textual Strategy in the 'Poetic' Prose of Derek Walcott: The Nobel Prize Speech

Although one is always ultimately engrossed in the primary world of Walcott's poems and plays, there is also, as a kind of referential reflex, the contrary motion of glimpsing and seeking thematic and even stylistic interconnections, parallels and contrasts within the secondary world of his essays, articles, published talks, and interviews. Walcott's Stockholm acceptance speech, 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory',¹ is at the very least a further valuable contribution to the debate on the nature of West Indian literary culture. But the fact of the Nobel Prize, however cynical we might normally be about the possible motivation of the selection committee from year to year, and the fact that Walcott was perfectly prepared to accept the honour and write the mandatory lecture, may lead us to look at its text with a more broadly enquiring eye. He was, after all, not just addressing his immediate audience in Stockholm; he was speaking to and for the world of all those for whom literary art means something, and specifically for the smaller world of the archipelago. In view of the citation of the Swedish Academy of Letters, that through Walcott 'West Indian culture has found its great poet', for whom 'three loyalties are central ... the Caribbean where he lives, the English language, and his African origin', and that the award was made 'for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment', we might expect him in his lecture to be addressing the topic of that Caribbean world and his place within it.

Under 'normal' circumstances, he could say anything he wanted to, and he has certainly earned that right. What one notices straight away is the fact that the honorific context itself has not deflected him from his purpose. Like such predecessors as Thomas Mann, William Faulkner, and his close friend Joseph Brodsky, Walcott doesn't waste his breath devising ingeniously diplomatic flatteries relating to this occasion. Instead, as we shall see, he takes his listeners immediately into a world that is the opposite of that cool, Nordic calm. The Nobel Prize framework sets up expectations of something quintessential, where the recipient of the prize
pulls out, if not all, then at least most of the stops. The example which comes to mind is Faulkner, who provided an epitome of his way of looking at history and art, honing and polishing the great, sweeping abstractions and generalizations that we find saturating his fiction, and confirming that ‘the eternal verities’ shall prevail. Walcott, we might expect, would offer his own summa or quintessence. Now, Walcott is no friend of history as we think we know it; but the Faulknerian model can still be applied, as the Southerner also distrusted history’s linearities, preferring to nurture a vision of dynastic mythography. Walcott, too, displaces history into other categories of experience more relevant to his view of the Caribbean.

Unlike Faulkner, Walcott is not at ease in shaping his discourse around abstractions, and is distrustful of prose utterance, despite his many reviews, the few judiciously aimed essays, and the interviews so generously granted. His precondition for departing from the modes of utterance offered by poetry or drama is that there be a concrete occasion or subject for a prose reflection or disquisition. The Nobel Prize award ceremony is such an occasion, no more nor less than a novel or a play or a calypso season. Although, at one stage in the early 1980s, Walcott was working on a longer work of prose, this has never reached the light of day. He can appreciate prose, but is impatient of its causal and sequential predictabilities, especially in the form of prose fiction.

What Walcott does in the Nobel speech is to make the external occasion a concrete specific that is built into the talk, the tenor of which is borne by the vehicle of a complex Caribbean ritual transplanted from another culture. This and other concreta allow him to shape his discourse as closely as possible, short of prosodical measure, to the condition of poetry — or, at least, to a form of prose discourse that approaches the condition of lyrical description. The topic chosen to exemplify the Caribbean condition is not one that Walcott has specifically treated before in his prose (or, indeed, in his poems and plays). But, though the particular topic is what one might least have expected, it potently reinforces and encapsulates Walcott’s total vision of the role and responsibility of artist and (wo)man in the Caribbean.

What he does over and above this is to insinuate a number of intertexts/intratexts or preoccupations familiar to us from earlier essays and interviews (as well as in his poetry, of course — but I shall not be taking exploration this far). The combination of resources in this lecture makes it, within its spatial limitations, arguably the closest Walcott has got so far to creating a masterpiece in prose aspiring to poetry, with the tact of his deployment of discourse providing the additional atmosphere of drama.

We must, of course, make due consideration for the exigencies of the occasion: Walcott can attempt a summa, but can’t say everything he’s ever said that might be important. In terms of the preoccupations of his oeuvre hitherto, it is nevertheless useful to note the kinds of thing he has chosen,
or has been compelled, to leave out. The tonality of the lecture, which I shall be returning to, avoids two extremes characteristic of Walcott, these avoidances constituting an acknowledgement that the rhetorical occasion does not call for a combative stance – there is none of the profound darkness of vision to be found in his two most monumental essays, ‘What the Twilight Says’, with its exploratory, savagely personal distemper and discursive excess, and the better-balanced piece ‘The Muse of History’; and there are none of the amicably sharp, dry put-downs that occur in many shorter essays and interviews. As far as content is concerned, he steers clear of any direct treatment of what we may call the ‘Africa complex’, particularly as set out in his extended polemical essays. Walcott’s talismanically reiterated warning to his fellow West Indians to resist the destructive urge towards bitterness and revenge is not to be heard in the lecture. He makes nothing directly out of his own dual racial personality; instead, this is tactfully displaced onto mention of two other writers with paradigmatic status for him, then is re-fragmented into a multicultural vision. The few writers he does mention are, on the whole, certainly not an inventory of touchstones in his own literary career; the mention of them serves other, non-autobiographical purposes. The place of the writer in the community of artists is adumbrated, but with none of the underpinnings of defensive position-taking that characterize Walcott’s essays and interviews whenever he seeks to define his own artistic integrity against the suspicions of others. For example, no place is made in the lecture for any mention of the central strategic notion of Walcott’s distaste for ‘originality’ at any price. The cultural problems besetting West Indian society – for example, the petty-bourgeois neglect of the arts, which Walcott so often pillories – are not addressed; the occasion of this lecture is not used to settle scores of this pragmatic kind. Nor are the cultural specifica of the West Indian personality brought into the discussion, so that Walcott’s highly differentiated loyalty towards such folk expressions as calypso, Carnival, dance, folk-narrative and dialect forms no part of the texture of discourse. Finally, and a matter pertinent to the drift of his lecture, there is barely the slightest of indications that there might be an epistemological, cultural, even racial or racist divide between the East Indian and the African–Caribbean communities of the West Indies – a contempt of attitude among East Indians in Trinidad towards blacks, a contempt of action or worse in Guyana. This syndrome is a serious-enough matter for Walcott elsewhere, particularly when he is grappling with the often pernicious attitudes of V.S. Naipaul. In the Nobel Prize lecture, Walcott’s concerns are different ones.

I mention this last point because Walcott opens by introducing us to the East Indian population of the village of Felicity, on the edge of the Caroni plain in the north of Trinidad. Walcott is visiting the village with friends from America, to observe the Saturday afternoon preparations for an epic Hindu drama that he has heard and thought about, but never seen. 3 In the
event, he has to leave before the play itself starts the first leg of its nine-day performance: the play is performed in the two hours before nightfall, but Walcott and his friends want instead to see the scarlet ibises coming home at dusk in the Caroni Swamp.

Walcott puts the chief visual ingredients of the scene in place with a lightness of touch befitting the buoyancy of the light and the atmosphere of preparation, and his implicit role as observer from another culture. (This last role—of being both inside and outside—has been insinuated by the very mention of his ‘American friends’: one outcome of Walcott’s peregrinatory alternation between the Caribbean and North America, and the occasion for him to act as knowledgeable yet not all-knowing guide.) The following elements turn out to be poetically strategic to later phases of the lecture: the child-actors assemble ‘on a field strung with different-colored flags’; boys dressed in red and black aim ‘arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light’. A huge effigy of the god Rama lies on the ground in disassembled body-sections constructed of woven bamboo-cane; this effigy will be burned on the ninth day of the epic performance.

Upon this base Walcott mounts a variety of observations relating to various cultures; once again, his lightness of touch conceals a larger strategy. With an exclamation, he connects the felicitous buoyancy of the mood to the ‘gentle Anglo-Saxon name’ of the village—or, rather, it is ‘an epical memory’ (that of the Hindu play) that is to be associated with both mood and village-name. The notion of ‘memory’ recurs later. What is hidden in the objet trouvé of Felicity is, however, surely another ‘epical memory’: Felicity was the Roman goddess of good luck, and the emperors granted her prominence as symbolizing the blessings of the imperial regime; the notion of the ‘imperial’ turns up later, and the image of an Anglo-Saxon Empire has already been casually implanted at the very opening of the lecture: the East Indians are in Felicity because the Caroni plain is still a sugar growing area, and indentured cane cutters were brought there after the emancipation of the slaves.

Continuing with this laconic analogism, Walcott draws what he calls ‘a predictable parallel’ between the effigy of Rama and the ‘fallen statue of Ozymandius and his empire’. He then stresses the contrast between this final loss of empire in an empty desert and the cyclical, ‘evergreen’ return of Rama ‘the fragmented god’ after destruction by fire. Final dismemberment is contrasted with cyclical re-memberment.

Walcott doesn’t know what the actors represent, but supposes they are princes and gods. This blithe uncertainty is then generalized self-critically as the embodiment of what he terms ‘our African and Asian diasporas’—implicitly another form of fragmentation, then. The notion of cultural assumptions and cross-connections now assumes further analogue forms: first, Walcott adapting the Odyssey ‘for a theatre in England’ and expecting the London audience to know the story; second, only the East Indians in Trinidad knowing the stories of the Hindu deities. Gently suggested here
is a local disinclination to meet other cultures half-way; the hidden irony in Walcott’s consciously using the phrase ‘apart from the Indians’ is that the remark reflects a defence-mechanism on the part of black Trinidadians against the contempt shown by a dominant culture. Another irony is also there for the taking: Walcott indicates that the epic of Rama and the epic of Odysseus both stem from Asia Minor. He doesn’t bother to make the link with Ozymandius. Watch Asia Minor, because it returns at the end of Walcott’s lecture.

The idea of cultural assumptions is subjected to further variations. Having mentioned in passing his role as theatre director, Walcott confesses to having tried to regard the epic drama called Ramleela as a piece of theatrical illusion, poorly performed by amateurs who had worked themselves into their roles. Instead, roles were being assumed naturally, as identities in a drama of faith and conviction, a celebration of the reality and ‘validity of India’; the acting would be as buoyant, Walcott says, ‘as those bamboo arrows crisscrossing the afternoon pasture’.

With tactical candour, Walcott accuses himself of a misplaced response: ‘I misread an event through a visual echo of History,’ he says. The sugar-cane fields, indenture, ‘the evocation of vanished armies’ and the rest, it is implied, make the play seem to be merely a note in the grand theme of the Ozymandian British Empire, a transplantation. Behind this we again find Walcott’s civil quarrel with V.S. Naipaul: Naipaul believes in the progressive virtues of linear history, Walcott in the recurrences of the mythic. To believe in history means to find nullity or loss in the Caribbean, as Naipaul does – for him, nothing was created there, and Caribbean man is a mimic man. Hence Walcott’s own admission that he has slipped into the expectation that the epic drama will reveal ‘elegy, ... loss, even ... degenerative mimicry’. Instead, he finds ‘a delight of conviction, not loss’, and a sense of felicity. The summative term that Walcott applies here is the opposite of an elegiac mourning for the losses of history – this buoyant term is ‘elation’. Analogical markers occur later, such as ‘ecstasy’, ‘joy’, self-astonishment, surprise, ‘delight’, ‘exultation’, ‘elemental awe’. Indeed, the closing two paragraphs of the lecture speak cumulatively of ‘an alarming joy’, ‘the pain that is joy’, ‘What is joy without fear?’, ‘simple joys’, and a grateful joy. These are certainly abstractions, but they are all clothed in the tangibility of Walcott’s spiritual and artistic commitment to the Caribbean, its manifold inheritances, and his expression of these.

But the term least-employed here, ‘elation’, is that which is central to Walcott’s response, allegiance, and aesthetic; no other term occurs so frequently in his prose writings to characterize elements of a complex psychic continuum of personal interaction with the environment of the Caribbean. The key precursor-text in terms of the arguments Walcott is developing here is the essay ‘The Muse of History’, where passages from Pablo Neruda are associated with the deepest responses of the Caribbean artist: ‘It is this awe of the numinous, this elemental privilege of naming
the new world, which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban’ (p. 5). In the same essay, the astonishing thing about St–John Perse and Aimé Césaire, for Walcott, ‘is their elation, their staggering elation in possibility ... [an] elation in presences’ (p. 17). Elsewhere, the exhilarated West Indian artist surveys his island in a condition of ‘elation’ or ‘creative possession’. Offset against this is the history-burdened vision of the Caribbean as shipwreck and fragmentation: to such writers, ‘the New World offers not elation but cynicism, a despair at the vices of the Old which they feel must be repeated’ ('Muse', p. 7). In an interview with Edward Hirsch, Walcott subverts the notion of history and allies it with the idea of the Caribbean artist making the New World from scratch: all of Walcott’s contemporaries, he says, ‘had this tremendous sense of elation from really being the owners of a people; I mean, aesthetically, creatively. Having an entire history, an entire country, given to you is a tremendous gift for anyone’. At the age of eighteen, he experienced a ‘tremendous elation’ while surveying the St Lucian landscape, ‘knowing that nobody had really written about this. It was exhilarating to know that I was privileged to be the first one to put down the name of a certain town, or fisherman, or road – a privilege very few writers ever have’. In the broadest experiential terms, Walcott can see in the ‘ex-colonies’ ‘a sort of elation about life’ that is different from elsewhere. Although Walcott’s specific use of the word ‘elation’ in the Nobel lecture has the simplest of references – to the East Indians’ immediate, unqualified, delighted, unquestioning involvement in the whole physical scene informing the preparations for the drama – the whole range of semantic and contextual implications of the word in the writer’s personal lexicon also irradiates the fleeting moment of its use here.

Other central semantic counters now multiply, when Walcott asks his audience to contemplate all the elements of this Asian scene presented so far. The Ozymandias/Rama-effigy word ‘fragments’ is reinvoked to characterize the punctuation of the Caroni landscape by the cultural traces of India: implicitly, Hindu temples are translated into full-stops, minarets into exclamation-points. In a return to the likes of Naipaul, Walcott claims to understand how these ritual traces can be seen as embarrassing, degenerate parodies. The emerging theme of language now takes the form of Walcott’s own parodic representation of the ‘purists’ view of such traces as that of ‘grammarians’ looking on a ‘dialect’. The imperial theme recurs: such a view is like the contrast between empire and colony, between city and province – this last reference is preparation for a major theme that is presented in a later phase of the lecture. All this is now fleetly concentrated in the twin notions of the phantom limb of memory yearning to rejoin the central ‘body’, ‘like those bamboo thighs of the god’. The last negative formulation shifts from Asian–Caribbean deity to Caribbean man, when Walcott re-uses from ‘What the Twilight Says’ the
observation of the nineteenth-century historian A.J. Froude that 'there are no people' in the West Indies 'in the true sense of the word'. Walcott does not have to mention how the dragon's-teeth of this remark were sowed in the fertile soil of Naipaul's negativism. 'No people,' Walcott echoes ironically; 'Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken.' In turning this on its head by affirming that the Hindu play 'was like a dialect, a branch of its original language, an abridgement of it, but not a distortion or even a reduction of its epic scale', Walcott is reclaiming the terms of discourse, whose implications (transformed continuity of culture rather than its dogged preservation) he spins out later on.

What we encounter now is a kind of lyrical interlude or concentratedly poetic resting of breath before Walcott continues with a new aspect of the theme of fragmentation. Two 'performances', one human, the other from the natural world, are paralleled in Walcott's juxtaposition of the iconic features of the drama he leaves and those of the flocks of ibises. The 'scarlet ... boy archers' and the 'red flags' are like the 'arrowing flocks of scarlet ibises'. The birds land in the Caroni Swamp, turning an islet into 'a flowering tree, an anchored immortelle'. The metaphorical implication, in terms of the lecture's preoccupations, takes us back to the perpetual renewals of nature; there is the notion of ships at anchor among the islands of the Caribbean — a page earlier, the platform on which the play is performed is represented as a 'raft' in an 'ocean of cane', an image which is potentiated at a crucial moment later in the lecture. Finally, the red immortelle is not a gratuitous image, either — it is a natural icon of the Caribbean, like the pohutukawa tree in New Zealand; it drags with it the memory of its decorative use on the slave plantations; it is, like so many of the botanical terms upon which Walcott lovingly dwells in his poetry, of French origin; and its meaning encapsulates the everlastingness of memory beyond historical time. This is why Walcott can state that 'the sigh of History meant nothing here', when one is faced by the beauty of the landscape. From dialect, Walcott slips backward into the lexis of the pre-grammatical: the 'sigh' and the 'groan' of history dissolve in the 'single gasp of gratitude' that blends the visions of ibises and drama.

Walcott now rejects his first impulse to seek in the epic drama 'evocations of a lost India' — what the East Indians never knew cannot be 'lost', so there is no place in the Caribbean for nostalgia, for what he calls, in 'The Muse of History', 'a yearning for ruins' (p. 7). In the lecture, he confirms that 'there are few ruins to sigh over.' In a 1990 interview with Luigi Sampietro, the immediate elements of discourse found in the Nobel lecture are concentrated in an alternative disposition — Walcott states that in the Caribbean 'there are no visible ruins — no visible echoes of destruction. The emphasis is not on a repetition of history so much as on the beginning, daily, of elation — of pleasure and delight — which is supplied by the geography of the Caribbean'. Walcott sees the epic drama now as 'celebrations of a real presence', to which he can open himself — perhaps,
he muses, in a film ‘that would be a long-drawn sigh over Felicity’. For Walcott, the festivities of a multitude of ethnic groups constitute ‘all the fragmented languages of Trinidad’.

In an analogy drawn from archaeological restoration, Walcott sees the active spiritual engagement with these cultural traces as resembling the gathering and piecing together of a vase. In the white sealing scars that renew its symmetry resides more love and pain than in any regard for the original. The logic of the analogy, significantly, is that the pieced-together vase is not the restoration of, say, a Greek amphora: the restoration runs against such a historicizing attitude, and it is ‘our African and Asiatic fragments’ that are amalgamated into one artefact. Hence Walcott’s summarizing sentence: ‘Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent’. This relates to the conviction, expressed elsewhere, that the whole Caribbean Basin, including the archipelago with its islands fragmented into petty nationalisms, is held together by a totality of racial experience. Unspoken here, too, is Walcott’s conviction that ‘an island culture ... whether Greek or West Indian’, is bound to produce cultural ‘cross-fertilization’.

Via art, Walcott has moved thematically from popular culture back to language, and now to poetry itself, which is a ‘remaking’ of ‘fragmented memory’, and which happens to resemble his own poetic practice. The art of poetry is metaphorized as the assembling of the god Rama by the artisans of Felicity, ‘cane by cane, reed by weaving reed, line by plaited line’. This last punning construction on ‘line’ as rope and verse-line exemplifies a figure encountered throughout Walcott’s poetry, but especially in the epical Omeros: the interweaving of the technical diction of poetic craft with everyday action and experience. This technique becomes more densely present later in the lecture.

The poetic theme now both intensifies and expands. We must keep in mind that the discourse here is a plaiting or indissoluble weaving of two strands: the testimony of Walcott in his function as a poet for his people; and his people’s own restoration of their cultural fragments. In a baroque shift from the vase image, the past is presented as a marmoreal, sculpted statue, with the present as fresh dewdrops beading its forehead. Poetry ‘conjugates both tenses simultaneously’ and, in an image reminiscent of Seamus Heaney, excavates the ‘buried’ imperial language or diction of institutions, defying it through the dewdrop freshness of the individual dialects of the archipelago. The manifold connotations here include the metropolitan, ‘absent’ and literally monolithic essence of the frowning statue, and the interrelated multiplicity and fresh immediacy of dewdrops, islands, and dialects. Walcott’s sentences are simple, but the logic fiercely complex. The central utterance, harking back to the anchored immortelle and the rafts of cane, is that ‘poetry is an island that breaks away from the main’. This, too, is polysemous, punning on mainland and ocean, the is-
land fixed yet as free to move as a ship on the main. In the next paragraph, the original metropolitan language is re-cast as exhausted ‘fog trying to cross an ocean’ and dissolving in the process (a process of creative fragmentation). The merging of ship and sail and mist that runs through Walcott’s later poetry is thus echoed here. Verbally more subterranean because dispersed is a parallelism set up between making and remaking, fresh and refreshing; this moves Walcott now towards the notions of naming and renaming, in the conjoined senses of crafting poetry and of creating and ordering the epistemes of Caribbean existence. As we have seen, renaming, because in the Caribbean it is an epistemological process of naming afresh or, for the poet, for the first, Adamic time, is an act that produces ‘elation’.

We are returned to the African slaves and indentured East Indians now; deprived of their original language, they gather ‘fragments of an old, epic vocabulary’, fashioning new metaphors, and accepting given place-names like Felicity, as did Crusoe and as does the poet, every morning of their working day. The Crusoe reference is, of course, a pivotal intertext of Walcott’s, and the notion of the morning of creativity has both broader and more mundanely autobiographical implications. The poetic urge is hinted at homologously and prosodically in the wit of Crusoe ‘assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity’; and other works by Walcott make it clear that when he says Crusoe, like the poet, is ‘even renaming himself’, what is involved is the assumption of the name of Friday, just as Caribbean man is an ennobled Caliban, not a Prospero. Walcott stresses the strength and vitality of ‘a huge tribal vocabulary’ which, in a continuation of the archaeology/Crusoe ideas, is retrieved from the ‘shards’ and from ‘this shipwreck of fragments’.

The whole diaspora, Middle Passage and all, is now concentrated by Walcott in the historyless ferment and mongrelized babel of Trinidad’s Port of Spain. Here, says Walcott, is the ‘writer’s heaven’; here, he says ironically, are A.J. Froude’s ‘non-people’. The whole central section of the lecture treats a topic which Walcott has touched on in his poetry, but has never focused on in his prose. It is prefaced with the ironical observation that ‘a culture, we all know, is made by its cities’. To wake in the sudden light of a Port of Spain dawn is to experience a ‘surprising peace’, but what disorients Walcott as his camera-eye scans the urban scene outside his window is the fact that the architecture is imitating the brutal aspirations of another, northern climate – imitating its power, even its air-conditioned coldness. The comparisons ironically adduced are the ‘colonial’ names of Columbus and Des Moines. The seriousness and seasonality of the north is contrasted, with mock contempt, to the unending postcard summer of the tropics. Like the hissing serpent voice of the worm in ‘A Far Cry from Africa’, Walcott has almost persuaded his audience that what he is arguing is the case. But Port of Spain’s ‘assertion of power’ can only be a gesture, for it is in the nature of the Caribbean to lack any
power save the power of art, as many comments of Walcott's elsewhere attest. What Walcott really believes is that 'where there's concrete, there the power is, and the further you go from the concrete the more you come to the vegetation, nature and so on' – and it is the intercalation of Caribbean cities with their natural surroundings, and their essence of being 'magnified market towns', which delights Walcott as he expands his argument. The preceding argument of contemptuous comparison turns out, of course, to be a parody of Froude and, implicitly, of Naipaul. An analogy which uses the inadequate tools of formal classical prosody finds both Caribbean geography and music deficient in subtlety – the 'two stresses' and 'incomplete meter' of 'hot and wet, sun and rain, light and shadow'. Walcott shrugs this off: 'We cannot change contempt'.

Nobody wants the Caribbean cities to be cities, says Walcott. They are still much as they were in the prose of those who depicted them – and Walcott is magnanimous enough to start with Naipaul, in a brief list which ends with Aimé Césaire and St-John Perse, who were his old touchstones in 'The Muse of History'. Walcott distances himself from the inorganicism of the city and freshens up the vegetative metaphor of the flowering of literature when he mentions his delight 'in watching a literature .. bud and open, island by island, in the early morning of a culture'.

Note that Walcott overcomes fragmentation, and asserts a pan-Caribbean aesthetic, by seeing this as 'one literature in several imperial languages, French, English, Spanish'; this also echoes his conviction, expressed elsewhere, that writers in the Caribbean are lucky to have the 'language of the master' and to recognize 'the language's essential duality' in their fertilization of it 'by the language of dialect'.

As though narrative time has passed in the course of his reflections, it is now 'a heat-stoned afternoon'; transferring the notion of flowering now, Walcott looks out again at a backyard in Port of Spain, where a love vine spills over a fence, and there are palms and a mountain in the distance. The traveler reads this as lethargy, as torpor', Walcott comments – Froude and Naipaul again. If there is material and intellectual deprivation, argues Walcott, implicating the Crusoe theme again, a man must make a virtue of necessity – he must shape thought, must record it, must commemorate. And we are back to the making of the literary culture of the Caribbean. There follows a brilliantly sensuous evocation, in the style of a Renaissance philosopher perhaps, of the ideal Caribbean city. The ideal includes a wishful setting back to a nineteenth-century condition of horse-drawn traffic, and a triumph of racial and humane variety and intermixture. This, he says, 'is how Athens may have been before it became a cultural echo'. Confirmed here is Walcott's conviction, out of which grew the poem Omeros, of the Caribbean archipelago as a 'New Aegean'. Walcott has put this more forcefully elsewhere – part of the meaning of Omeros, he says, 'is that the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean'; what we take to be bleached stones were really painted purple and gold, with
the bright and lurid taste of Puerto Ricans, so that the real Greece was
very Caribbean, with ‘the same vigour and elation’. 28 The ‘visible poetry
of the Antilles’ resides in such things as the presence of the Caribbean Sea,
and in what Walcott calls ‘survival’; if the beauty of Port of Spain’s build-
ings can be seen in its ‘baroque woodwork’, this is a survival. The Caroni
Plain is evoked behind the city, and poetic figuration takes us back to the
start of the lecture, with Indian prayer flags fluttering, and ibises flying by
‘like floating flags’. The poetry of the Caribbean is not in ‘postcard sad­nesses’ – later on, Walcott cites Lévi–Strauss’s term tristes tropiques and
applies it to the elegiac pathos of the outsider’s view, which is also termed
the traveler’s ‘malaise’. In literature, this is the view of Froude, of Conrad,
even of Graham Greene. The delicate engravings of the nineteenth century
– the equivalents of our postcards – misunderstood the harsh light of the
tropics ‘and the people on whom the light falls’, softening and ordering
the landscape via the distorting lens of history. The real, horse-drawn
nineteenth century dictates rhythmically much of the life of the Caribbean,
says Walcott, as it does the West Indian novel. Compare ‘What the
Twilight Says’: ‘the apparent conservatism of West Indian fiction ... is ...
but a memory’ of the folk forms of an earlier epoch (p. 24).
The term ‘malaise’ echoes ‘What the Twilight Says’, where there is what
Walcott calls the colonials’ ‘malarial enervation: that nothing could ever
be built’ in the Caribbean (p. 4). In ‘The Muse of History’, the ‘malaise’ is
there again, and defined as ‘the malaria of nostalgia’ (p. 18) and ‘an
oceanic nostalgia for the older culture’ (p. 7). In the Nobel lecture, Walcott
once again uses Froude as his foil for the unnamed Naipaul, as the source
for the now so familiar notion ‘that since History is based on achievement,
and since the history of the Antilles was so genetically corrupt ... a culture
was inconceivable, and nothing could ever be created’ there. On the con­
trary: just as the Caribbean city ‘is satisfied with its own scale’, so
Caribbean culture ‘is not evolving but already shaped’. Here is Walcott’s
summative rejection of historical progressivism, and it’s good enough as
a profession of unconditional acceptance – though his retort to Naipaul in
a recent interview (‘Perhaps it should read that “Nothing was created by
the British in the West Indies”’) 29 is also food for thought.
Walcott now turns his gaze outward towards his immediate audience
and the immediate occasion, and says: ‘Here, on the raft of this dais, there
is the sound of the applauding surf: our landscape, our history, recog­
nized, “at last”.’ In his witty deconstruction of the dead metaphor of
‘waves of applause’ there are manifold implications and evocations. It is
as though Walcott the castaway, the fortunate traveler, has rafted himself
and his tiny island of St Lucia out of the Caribbean Sea into the lapping
(or lapping-up) waters of the Old World audience. Stockholm has finally
silenced Froude and Naipaul. There is the further implication that Walcott,
standing on the dais, is in stasis and concentration, and the applauding
public in motion. The passing traveler and the tourist, Walcott suggests,
cannot love a particular landscape; only he who stays there, ‘in stasis and concentration’, can do so. It is at this point, at the latest, that one will see why the lecture is so lyrical and buoyant. It is a declaration of love matching the world’s declaration of respect; like most declarations of love, it avoids intellection; its abstractions are only such as can be rendered tangible, sensuous; as in declarations of love, there is quiet conviction alternating with soaring elation, and an avoidance of banal factualities.

An homage to St-John Perse now follows. This white creole from Guadeloupe, states Walcott, ‘was the first Antillean to win this prize for poetry’. In the ‘ironic republic that is poetry’, he continues, borrowing a phrase from Joseph Brodsky, we cannot deny Perse any more than we can deny the African Aimé Césaire. Certain evocative images now herald their appearance: the freshness of Perse’s poetry is ‘the first breeze’ of sunrise, the sound of pages turning is the rustle of palm trees; later, to see cabbage palms rustling in the breeze is to imagine them ‘reciting Perse’. Art and nature form a perfect imaginative symbiosis, and the islands, Walcott exclaims, are at last ‘writing themselves’, rather than being written about by the likes of Froude. Walcott explodes now into a virtuoso redeployment of the major imagery and diction encountered in the lecture so far. The epic Hindu drama of Ramleela merges with Perse’s Anabase, an ‘imaginary epic’ with an Asian setting; the young archer fires his arrows across the flagged field among the exclamation points of Muslim minarets and the young Perse gathers his epic fragments ‘from the lances of the cane fields’ in Guadeloupe, and the ‘compact expedition’ of his epic begins to move to ‘the rustling march of cabbage palms in a Caribbean sunrise’. In an allusion to the poetic project of Omeros and an echo of the section ‘Archipelagoes’ from the poem called ‘Map of the New World’, the anonymous boy we choose to call Homer skips a pebble across the Aegean to generate the skipping lines of Greek epic. These artist-figures are all children, because it is only right that the young be at the sunrise of creation. And Walcott forces the renaming of the same images into ever-tightening series: ‘For every poet it is always morning in the world’; the writer exults to witness ‘the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn’. The sounds of leaves at sunrise are ‘the sounds of a fresh dialect’. Walcott has noted elsewhere, of Wallace Stevens composing poetry while he walked, that ‘the pace of strolling is iambic pentameter’, in the lecture, the ‘meter’ of a poet’s personal style is his life, and his body, Adamic and Crusoe-esque, itself responds to the Antillean presence ‘like a walking, a waking, island’.

What now follows looks like a brief digression, but it is held in place by the terms of discourse already employed (language, naming, words, meter, body). The natural ‘dialect’ of nature, this ‘fresh language’, is associated by Walcott with ‘a fresh people’; in a renewal of the dais-reference, Walcott ‘stand[s] here in their name’, conscious of the duty he owes them as their poetic voice. Now the human dialect is matched to the natural
dialect, as the 'morning-stirred' names of St Lucian trees and valleys are listed – 'all songs and histories in themselves, pronounced not in French but in patois'. This celebration of the provincial over the metropolitan is then presented in the yet starker juxtaposition of a passage of classic English verse and a St Lucian folksong in French patois (superimposed West Indian metropolitanism in the school system; Black peasant substructure in the countryside); but reconciliation of the 'two languages' one hears on rising already resides in the shared metrical impulse. Walcott presents the 'body' or immediate presence of poetry without further comment at this point, four-fifths of the way through his address. There are intertextual resonances in the eight lines Walcott quotes from William Cowper's 'Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk'. Beneficiaries of a 'colonial' education, but with a post-colonial consciousness, will be aware that 'I am monarch of all I survey' expresses both Crusoe'scolonialist claim to exclusivity and power and also his rejection of 'this horrible place' and its vacuity. There is thus an encoding here of Walcott's ironically echoic defiance of Froude and Naipaul, particularly when one considers the prior presence in the lecture of Crusoe as primal namer (the school-room poetry scenario is refashioned, to a primal purpose, at the close of the talk), and the fact that the first four – 'positive' – lines from Cowper were quoted by Walcott long ago in his lecture 'The Figure of Crusoe' (p. 8) to illustrate the creative ego.

Note that these very different dawn-songs encode 'histories' – of individuals, mythically, not of the race. Once we understand this, and the way in which the load-bearing image of dawn/sunrise inherently militates against the retrospectivity of history, we can accept the otherwise unmediated deictic force of Walcott's statement immediately following the patois love-song: 'It is not that History is obliterated by this sunrise'. But history is once again under the control of the old metaphors drawn from the timelessness of nature: instead of the sigh of history, 'the sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage'; the immortelle's scarlet is the blood of the butchered Caribs; surf on sand 'cannot erase the African memory'. The 'lances of cane' on the Plain of Caroni are the bars of a prison still trapping the ghosts of indentured Asians. What Walcott 'reads' here is 'the grace of effort', which makes the St Lucian woodcutter one with himself, the artisan-poet 'from boyhood'. Cutting across this past, which Walcott can still read in the Antillean landscape, are the simplifications of contemporary touristic venality. The homologous mahogany of woodcutters' faces (fragments of Africa) is mocked by the tourist's 'mahogany tan'. The metaphor of the raft is naturalized to the swimming-pool raft bearing cocktail drinks in the blue pool of the postcard Caribbean. But, Walcott warns, the memory of the sea is vast, and each of its islands an act of remembrance, 'an effort of memory' (again the intimation both of landscape as its own naming, and of the poet's task of recollective/re-collective celebration).
The earlier image of dissolving fog over the archipelago is reworked now in terms of ‘amnesia’, another major theme of Walcott’s writing. The artistic imagination in the arc of Antillean islands is a rainbow or arc-en-ciel piercing the fog of cultural amnesia. In a 1977 interview, Walcott stresses the multitudinous impurity of the New World, the fact that it is a broken arc that reaches from Africa to the Americas; ‘we only know half the arc’, he says, ‘and anything beyond that half arc has been torn from our memory’. Instead, the cultural sensibility ‘has been broken and re-created’. In the lecture, Walcott warns that this sensibility can be broken again. The memory of genocidal ‘decimation’ is the blasted root of Antillean history; a new decimation, one infers, can arise out of the susceptibility of these fragmented ‘island nations’ to the ‘benign blight’ of the descending ‘arc’ of tourism’s progress. Here the hotels are punningly rendered as ‘white-winged’ birds spreading like a crust of guano across the landscape, in contrast to the naturally fluid ‘brown river’ of houses clustering on the volcanic hills outside the St Lucian town of Soufrière. Walcott points out twice in succession that his own prose in the Nobel lecture is itself threatening his cherished, backward, unimportant landscapes, corrupting them through tourism ‘into significance’. In an echo of the exclamation-marks of minarets, Walcott evokes ‘the hanging question of some fisherman’s smoke’ at the end of a solitary beach, and the question suspended is: will this all disappear? The fishermen, in a re-working of the topos of ‘mahogany’ skin, are trees organically rooted in their environment, the bark of their skin ‘filmed with sweat’. The alternative to this is the ‘rootless trees’ of suited entrepreneurs, selling out the islands.

There is truth in the painful and simple joy aroused by the sight of African children in St Lucia and East Indian children at the epic drama of Felicity. It is not innocence, but this truth and the truth of literature and the imagination, that Walcott prays will be cherished and preserved, like the blessed obscurity of his island of birth. And, in a daring feat which might be taken for conceit but shouldn’t, Walcott’s closing sentence returns us to the childhood beginnings of literary creativity: if before we had the boy Homer in the Aegean archipelago, with his pebble-skipping lines of epic poetry, now we have, alongside the delight of the arrow-flying child at Felicity, ‘another life’: that of Walcott’s schoolboy self in the Caribbean archipelago, the pages of his exercise book framing stanzas ‘that might contain the light of the hills’.

The lecture is an exhilarating display of elated creativity – a poem in the surface garb of prose. The technique has the lightness and translucency of a mature master, who has been engaged in assembling and shuffling and transforming the lyric fragments of his deepest beliefs, raising the epic, cyclical and mythic impulse of his people above the distorting linearity of the colonialist myth of history. Which returns us to the title. It is perhaps noteworthy that Walcott has only once before, in ‘The Muse of History’ (p. 14), used the term ‘Antillean’, and there he was declaring his kinship
with Césaire. We might dwell on the thought that the word ‘Antilles’ occurs some 25 times in the Nobel lecture. It would of course be logical in a framework embracing the French literature of the Caribbean for Walcott to use the Romance designation. In referring to the ‘New Aegean’ in ‘The Muse of History’, Walcott calls the Caribbean of the poets ‘the Isles of the Blest, the Fortunate Isles, … the remote Bermudas, … Prospero’s isle, … Crusoe’s Juan Fernández, … Cythera’ (p. 6), and not ‘the Antilles’. But recall that the chief exemplar of the Nobel lecture is an East Indian ceremony, on a plain whose name, originally ‘Caroni’, is Amerindian. The post-Conquest, Columbian term ‘West Indies’ has been carefully side-stepped by Walcott, because it encodes the linear errancy of history. ‘Antilles’, by contrast, can be traced back beyond the legendary names of the Renaissance to Antiquity, where ‘Antilia’ was first a semi-mythical land somewhere west of Europe, was then fragmented on some maps into an archipelago, and was finally applied by the Spanish to the new-‘found’ islands as ‘las Antillas’. So the very choice of the term by Walcott is a celebration both of insular fragmentation and of a form of creative myth which, unlike the term ‘West Indies’, has the ring of a new reality about it.

NOTES


2. His articulation of distrust for prosaic utterance is enlisted as a kind of topos, especially within the context of public address, to underscore the more truthful, more essential ‘inarticulacy’ or ‘impossibility of communication’ of his true métier, which is poetry. See, for example, his comment on prose as ‘the most immoral form of feeling’ in ‘The Figure of Crusoe: On the theme of isolation in West Indian writing’ (unpublished typescript lecture delivered at the St Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies, Trinidad, in 1965), p. 2; or prose as ‘the very opposite of the perpetual ignorance of poetry’, in ‘Caligula’s Horse’, opening address delivered at the Eighth Conference on West Indian Literature, Mona campus, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, May 1988, in After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing, ed. Stephen Slemon & Helen Tiffin (Mandelstrup: Dangaroo, 1989), p. 138. For similar remarks, see also ‘‘An Object Beyond One's Own Life”’, interview conducted by Luigi Sampietro in 1990, in Caribana 2 (1991), p. 28.


5. Walcott's constructive denial of the notion of linear history as applicable to the West Indies is elaborated in 'The Muse of History' and is interwoven with an explicit, deflationary analysis of Naipaul's concept of the 'mimic men' in 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?', a 1973 address to the University of Miami American Assembly on the United States and the Caribbean (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs 16.1, February 1974, pp. 3-13).

6. At its simplest, the term is applied to the spontaneous individuality of West Indian dancing, whose 'elation is almost anarchic' ('Patterns to Forget' in the Trinidad Guardian, 22 June 1966, p. 5) and West Indian stage acting: 'there is a great elation in it, even a tragic joy' ('Walcott Plans "Instant Theatre"' in the Trinidad Guardian, 20 August 1969, p. 8) and the young company of another West Indian director 'performs with refreshing elation' ('Mixing the Dance and Drama' in the Trinidad Guardian, 6 December 1972, p. 5). The actors in Walcott's Trinidad Theatre Workshop are 'drunk on elation' ('What the Twilight Says: An Overture', in Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970, pp. 3-40), p. 36. Walcott has a vision of his actors striding up a windy ridge in St Lucia, 'an elate company' ('Twilight', p. 36). Unlike the poets, West Indian novelists have 'an elation in composing' ('Walcott on Walcott', interview conducted by Dennis Scott, in Caribbean Quarterly XIV, 1-2, March-June 1968, p. 80). In Soyinka's dramatic prose, too, there is 'a daring and elation that is part of a new country's youth' ('Soyinka – A Poet Not Content with Genius' in the Sunday Guardian, 12 January 1969, p. 13). In 'Twilight' the schoolboy Walcott experiences 'the literatures of Empires' and the 'patois of the street' with the same 'elation of discovery' (p. 6; this phrase, with its connection to the Caribbean child's response to the Latin, Greek and British classics, occurs again at the close of 'Meanings' in Savacou: A Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement 2, 1970, p. 51). As a boy, he is 'elated' by his discovery of George Campbell and the recognition that the poet was mentioning things Walcott knew ('An Interview with Derek Walcott' by Edward Hirsch, New York, 1977, in Contemporary Literature XX, 3, Summer, 1979, p. 283); at nineteen, he is 'an elate, exuberant poet' ('Twilight', p. 11), feeling 'great elation and release' when reading Auden and Eliot ('The Art of Poetry XXXVII', p. 207). Writing of Jean and His Brothers, he recalls 'the elation and innocence of its self-creation' ('Derek's Most West Indian Play' in Sunday Guardian Magazine, 21 June 1970, p. 7).


8. 'An Interview with Derek Walcott' by Edward Hirsch, p. 289.

9. 'An Interview with Derek Walcott' by Edward Hirsch, p. 283. See also 'The Art of Poetry XXXVII': 'My generation of West Indian writers has felt such a powerful elation at having the privilege of writing about places and people for the first time ... there was no burden, no excess of literature in our heads. It was all new' (p. 211). Metatextually, Walcott can respond to what he senses is the unaccustomed – 'new' – tone of celebration in Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival, before his 'elation and gratitude' shrivel as Naipaul reverts to his old negativity ('The Garden Path', p. 28).

10. 'An Interview with Derek Walcott' (conducted by David Montenegro in September 1987) in Partisan Review 57, 2 (Spring 1990), p. 206.

12. ‘Twilight’, p. 18. This remark, from Froude’s The English in the West Indies, or The Bow of Ulysses (1888), forms part of the epigraph to the poem ‘Air’ in The Gulf and Other Poems (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 36. In ‘Air’, Walcott deflects the notion ‘There is too much nothing here’ away from human cultural vacuum towards the pre-colonial, all-engulfing presence of the rain forest.

13. ‘The epic-minded poet ... finds no ruins’ (‘The Muse of History’, p. 8); a conviction Walcott has repeatedly stated elsewhere, in his poetry, certainly – even in ‘Ruins of a Great House’ – and in the prose: the slave-kings Dessalines and Christophe of Haiti ‘were our only noble ruins’, Christophe’s Citadel at La Ferrière the ‘one noble ruin in the archipelago’ (‘Twilight’, p. 14).

14. “‘An Object Beyond One’s Own Life’”, p. 25.

15. Walcott has in recent years become increasingly involved in the alternative narrativity and non-linear potentialities of film, particularly as a script-writer. Later in the lecture, he returns to the notion of the filmic in a mention of his eye panning the cityscape of Port of Spain. And the capturing of visual essences, which is characteristic of the lecture’s structural discourse, is summarized by Walcott at the close in the term ‘epiphany’. A cultural subtext which Walcott implicitly and ironically steers against in his references to film is that of the tropical travelogue (which surfaces later in adversions to the mis-representationalism of picture postcards and tourism).


17. ‘Meanings’, p. 49.

18. Cf ‘The Art of Poetry xxxvii’: ‘little unjoined shapes, little fragments’, which are welded together (pp. 229-30).

19. On the process of ‘naming something in its own presence’, see ‘We Are Still Being Betrayed’, p. 14. Excitement came from the things around the young Walcott ‘being named by people in a new language, even if that language was being called creole, or vulgar, or patois, or a dialect, or whatever’ (‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 287). Among several studies of the topos of ‘naming’ in Walcott’s poetry, see especially Michel Fabre, “Adam’s Task of Giving Things Their Names”: The Poetry of Derek Walcott’, New Letters 41 (Fall 1974), pp. 91-107, and Patricia Ismond, ‘Naming and Homecoming: Walcott’s Poetry Since Another Life’, ACLALS Bulletin Series VII, 2 (1985), pp. 27-38.

20. See ‘The Muse of History’ for the rejection of the noble savage myth and its replacement by Adamic re-creation, whether by Crusoe or by Friday (p. 5), and, of course, ‘The Figure of Crusoe’, passim. See ‘The Art of Poetry xxxvii’ for Walcott’s notion that it is actually Friday who is civilizing Crusoe (pp. 213-14).

21. What the Twilight Says’ opens with a bitter description of how the light of a tropical dusk ennobles the poverty of ramshackle cities, which are plunged back into into pastoralism at night; the ‘true cities’ outside the Caribbean, Walcott continues ironically, are illuminated at night by their artificiality (p. 3). In the same essay, the false mindset is mentioned whereby the Caribbean city, neither ‘metropolitan’ nor possessing ‘power’, hardly counts as a ‘true’ city (p. 27); at the close of the essay, alone the artist can be commended for envisaging the true city as being devoted to art, not to power or money (p. 40). In ‘The Muse of History’, the false nostalgia of existentialism, Walcott states, is the kind of illusory freedom of philosophy engendered by cities (p. 6); and, towards the close: the Caribbean peasant cannot afford the revolutionary rhetoric born of the city (p. 21). An orientation towards the city is even made responsible for the failure of contem-
porary American poets to see that song (as ‘the collective memory of the whole race’) lies at the heart of poetry (‘Conversation with Derek Walcott’ conducted in 1975 by Robert D. Hamner, in World Literature Written in English 16.2, November 1977, pp. 417-18). And: people who come from continental cities to the Caribbean ‘go through the process of being recultured’ to an absence of clock-time (‘The Art of Poetry XXXVII’, p. 214).

22. There is ‘no economic power, there is no political power. Art is lasting. It will outlast these things’ (‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 284). ‘We are powerless people. Or, I would say that the real power we have is in our people, in the artists and so on’ (‘Interview’ with Ned Thomas, 1980, in Kunaptopi III, 2, 1981, p. 43). There is a similar argument in ‘The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?’

23. ‘Interview’ with Ned Thomas, p. 46.

24. There are intertexts for this last metaphor, relating, for example, to the Adamic experience, far from urban Kingston, of ‘walking on a beach that is really deserted on an early morning’; ‘you can’t avoid the feeling that this is a new world’ (‘An Interview with Derek Walcott’ by Edward Hirsch, p. 283). And, more appositely: because of the exhilarating natural beauty of the Caribbean, ‘one can always think of European poetry as a twilight, and Caribbean literature as a morning – as opposite times of the day’ (‘“An Object Beyond One’s Own Life”’, p. 1).

27. See ‘Twilight’, p. 16, and ‘The Muse of History’, p. 6; cf also ‘Meanings’, p. 49.
31. ‘Conversation with Derek Walcott’ by Robert D. Hamner, p. 418.
32. The poem ‘The Sea is History’ explicitly refutes the claim that the Caribbean has no history and ‘tribal memory’ by celebrating the sea’s epic transformations of ‘natural’ history (The Star-Apple Kingdom; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979, pp. 25-28).
Veiled Politics in West Indian Criticism

Much West Indian literary criticism may be said to reflect two general approaches to the literary text. One approach tends toward the formalist school, and the other displays a socio-historical slant. Of course such generalizations run the risk of obscuring particular subtleties and nuances of critical emphasis, but at the same time they provide valuable insight into the nature of West Indian criticism. The implicit binarism in such a generalization reveals its own bias and provisional nature. It too is fictive, as fictive as the formalist procedures which repress diachrony in favour of the synchronic, or as the historical narrative which labours to obscure its own hermeneutic cracks as it represents the putative facts of history. At the same time, representing the Corpus of West Indian criticism as a locus of ideological conflict tends to foreground the ideologies which compete for prominence, and reveals the hegemonic underpinnings of these ideologies. In other words, what is at stake is far more than a disinterested exegesis of literary texts. Each analysis is itself symbolic of a certain political stance, that effort and desire to represent existence and experience in a particular way. In addition, the characterization of West Indian criticism as an arena of ideological conflict, falling into the two broad categories indicated earlier, facilitates an understanding of the critical enterprise as bound up with the construction of identity. The construction of identity which is so much a function of the West Indian novel for example, is no less an important force in West Indian criticism. Indeed, Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' notwithstanding, the crisis of identity is a fundamental issue for the West Indian poet also, as Derek Walcott eloquently demonstrated at the 1988 West Indian Literature Conference in Jamaica.

Walcott's opening speech at this conference represents a poetic identity crisis located in the act of resistance and contrariety. He opposes prose to verse, sense to non-sense, the unitarianism of one or the other margin to the equivocation between two margins, and the Cartesian ego of cerebra­tion to Romanticism's subjectivity structured through sensuality. Indeed, Walcott's critique, a term which he would no doubt resist in the context of his address, is far closer in methodology to the kind of French post­structuralist criticism which he disparages than his text might superficially
admit. The binary oppositions which his text establishes, and its procedural method of ‘playing’ between two margins is reminiscent of Barthian jouissance, that linguistic sensuality which signals and celebrates the death of all structures of signification as stable and transparent. However, Walcott’s jouissance is not discovered in the infinite interplay of signification, but in a determined retreat into the imagination of Romanticism. Walcott states:

I cannot think because I refuse to, unlike Descartes ... I don’t know how to think therefore I am. I am one who cannot accept these processes, of games of self-contradiction, of essays on poetry, any more than I can accept the right-hand margin of History, which begins in our language, from the left and proceeds without trim, without metre, without that closing question of the couplet until it satisfies itself with cause and effect. This ignorance is old. It is the future of the Caribbean.

Ironically, this resistance to structure and analytical method relies upon the same binarist and deconstructive procedures which Walcott is ostensibly refuting in his address. In addition, Walcott’s polemic, loosely veiled in the equivocation of his witticisms, argues against a reality constructed through cause and effect; it is an argument against a pervasive scientism and a linear concept of time and history. But while Walcott wishes to undermine the would-be stable and authoritarian representations of political and historical discourse, he feels constrained to argue against deconstruction’s destabilization of the sign. Indeed Walcott’s address exemplifies deconstruction’s aporias, those moments when the text contradicts itself, and the problematic of meaning becomes more readily apparent. Nevertheless, Walcott feels compelled to resist the destabilization of the sign after he has examined such linguistic instability in the service of poetry’s sublimity. Walcott comments on a typographical error made as he prepared his opening address for the Conference:

Typing this last word I made an error. I wrote the word ‘love’ instead of the word ‘life’; and have corrected it to mean what I intended. To mean what I intended is what this public prose would have me believe, but to discover, through a typographical error, what is accidental but also true is to leave in the error and write ‘I have avoided writing critical or philosophical prose for all of my love.”

Here we see Walcott attempting to distinguish poetry and the poet from prose and the politician. He is creating space to construct identity, the poem’s and the poet’s identity by attributing error and chaos to the ‘truth’ of poetry, and intention and sense to the ‘falsehood’ of critical prose. But such distinction is ultimately untenable, since his typographical error reveals, not only the mercurial nature of the linguistic sign, but the dependence of language itself, poetic and prosaic upon difference. This difference which permits the possibility of meaning and interpretation, allows Walcott to distinguish between the nuances of ‘life’ and ‘love’ or Auden’s ‘poet’ and ‘ports’. Such distinctions and subtleties are common to all
discourses, and are not a characteristic mark of poetry alone. The urge to establish these distinctions derives from Walcott's approach to the construction of identity.

I have begun this discussion of West Indian criticism with Walcott's 1988 opening address at the West Indian Literature Conference because in several ways, his approach highlights some aspects of West Indian criticism which are significant. Walcott distills meaning into gesture – a shrug. In its attempt to avoid the appearance of reasoned argument, his critique emphasizes the haphazard and contradictory nature of its own procedure. The anecdote of the typing error is included in the text and reinforced by its comparison with Auden's experience. Error produces truth and simultaneously celebrates the fallibility of the human. Idiosyncracy and resistance function as strategies of identity construction. This is not the logical Cartesian human who proceeds to truth by systematically avoiding fallibility. Rather, Walcott's human is a creature of Romanticism, recognizing that the possibility of error resides always in the 'spontaneous overflow' even when it is recollected 'in tranquillity'. The point is that a Romantic construction of the human and the literary is asserted in Walcott's address to subvert a post-structuralist deconstruction of the human and the literary.

Style functions importantly as an aspect of critical procedure. Where the typical structuralist/post-structuralist approach conveys the detachment of language understood as empty signifier, Walcott asserts the presence and individuality of the word. The sanctity of the imagination provides the hermetic retreat for the individual, and Walcott warns the individual to protect the 'Empire' of his mind: 'The imagination is a territory as subject to invasion and seizure as any far province of Empire.'5 Still somewhat daunted by the prospect of some deconstructionist emptying his signifiers of their Romantic humanity, Walcott reaffirms the primacy of poetic time and memory: 'The superficial idea of art as immortal is not what I mean: this is a prosaic idea of time, the immortality of art. To the poet, there is no word for this dimension of memory' [my emphasis].6 Thus the poet/hermit retreats not only into the imagination of Romanticism to secure poetic identity, but attempts to initiate a further retreat to a place more primal than the word, a dimension where there is no word to destabilize by the very act of naming, those alcoves of poetic memory. Walcott's text demonstrates the dilemma of the 'against theory' proposition. It commences as a subversion of the authority of public prose, but is itself an example of public prose. In an attempt to relinquish any association with the authority of the speaking subject as authorial voice and consciousness, the text foregrounds those errors which undermine authorial intent. But the text itself participates in a system of meaning, and even the erroneous underwrites interpretation, as Paul De Man's Blindness and Insight7 reminds us. Thus, we are left with contradiction and indeterminacy, and Walcott's admonishment to young poets to be 'protector[s] of silences'.8 Part of the irony of Walcott's text is not only that it attempts to resist post-
structuralism's destabilization of logocentricity by reasserting Romantic ideals, but that it moves towards an exile of self-imposed silence. Walcott invites the poet to relinquish the word for the silence of gesture—a shrug—a sneer. Resistance is reduced to taking a vow 'not to listen', and the final retreat is recognized in the cloistered life of the hermit.

Romanticism's veneration of the self, the essential 'I' in retreat from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution or the philistinism of 'Third World' existence is part of a critical tradition which privileges form and symbol. On one hand, Romanticism's emphasis on the creative imagination provides respite from the pervasive commodification, or what Aimé Cesaire calls the 'thingification' of capitalist ideology. However, such emphasis also reflects the increasing marginalization of the artist from society to the degree that he is forced to turn inward to construct identity. Ironically, although Walcott is anti-Cartesian in the text we have been examining, his emphasis on turning inward to the imagination is very similar to the Cartesian approach. In addition, the Romantic artist's emphasis on the creative imagination is an attempt to subvert and escape the alienating consequences of capitalist ideology. In other words, the creative imagination resists capitalist commodification; it resists the fragmentation of labour which Marxism tells us produces the alienation of the worker from his labour. Romanticism emphasizes the sanctity of the individual creative imagination and the organic unity of the creative work. Post-structuralism is potentially troubling to the Romantic view of art and the artist since it destabilizes both of these categories, and indeed alienates the artist from his art. In a manner of speaking, post-structuralism produces in the Romantic artist, the alienation from labour which capitalism precipitates in the proletariat. The Romantic artist retreats from society and turns inward to the imagination to avoid the corrupting force of capitalist ideology. Among other consequences, such introspection invariably signals a detachment from history and socio-political concerns. Textuality, which Walcott seems to associate with poetic rather than prosaic writing, becomes an alternative to history, and as Edward Said observes:

'Textuality' is the somewhat mystical and disinfected subject matter of literary theory ... Textuality has therefore become the exact antithesis and displacement of what might be called history. Textuality is considered to take place, yes, but by the same token it does not take place anywhere or anytime in particular. 9

In short, the refuge of textuality permits the construction of a transcendental selfhood in spite of the historical and socio-political vagaries of capitalism, and in the 'Third World', the debilitating effects of neocolonialism and imperialism. This substitution of textuality for history is evidenced in Walcott's 'Caligula's Horse' as we have seen, and it is also consistent with his analysis in a much earlier essay, 'The Muse of History'. In this essay Walcott argues that:
The common experience of the New World, even for its patrician writers whose veneration of the Old is read as the idolatry of the mestizo, is colonialism ... These writers reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory.10

Indeed, historical narrative is subject to the same structures of representation which characterize fictional narrative, and so in this sense history is fiction. But this is distinctly different from characterising the fictional aspect of history as myth. It is this legerdemain which Walcott employs to substitute textuality for history. Such substitution facilitates the elision of fundamentally different experiences between victor and victim, colonizer and colonized. Wilson Harris also establishes his critical perspective on the framework of this elision, so that he substitutes textuality (which in Harris’s case is often calcified myth, extricated from social and political experience) for history. This calcified myth approximates what Edward Said refers to as ‘latent Orientalism’. Said indicates that the West’s ‘orientalising’ of the East may be understood in the context of latent and manifest Orientalism. He states:

The distinction I am making is really between an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity, which I shall call latent Orientalism, and the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth, which I shall call manifest orientalism. Whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant.11

Indeed, it is this latent Orientalism which naturalizes Orientalism as a doctrine and as a means of comprehending the East. Latent Orientalism fixes the East in an unchanging context of difference and separateness, permitting divergences in the way Orientalism manifests itself without altering Orientalism as a doctrine.

If we consider Walcott’s and Harris’s substitution of myth for history as a type of positivity, recalling Said’s characterization of latent Orientalism, we recognize that such substitution tends to obscure the ideologies inherent in colonialism and imperialism. The socio-political manifestations of such ideologies then function as a type of immoral or amoral literature, for as Walcott indicates, history is ‘a kind of literature without morality’.12 Such a view of literature which locates the literary text not only outside, but above history and ideology is a further indication of Walcott’s and Harris’s indebtedness to Romanticism. As Terry Eagleton indicates in his analysis of the ideological underpinnings of Romanticism:

It is no accident that the period we are discussing [The Romantic Age] sees the rise of modern ‘aesthetics’, or the philosophy of art. It is mainly from this era, in the work of Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Coleridge and others, that we inherit our contemporary ideas of the ‘symbol’ and ‘aesthetic experience’, of ‘aesthetic harmony’ and the
Thus the literary, from Romanticism’s perspective, asserts a non-ideological, ahistorical stance, and this marks, not only its retreat from socio-political concerns, but more importantly its complicity with the dominant ideology of the bourgeois class. Indeed, much of literature’s hegemonic power derives from its representation, within those theoretical approaches that view literature as outside politics and history, as non-ideological. It is important to recognize that Eagleton is not dismissing Romanticism as mere escapism, but acknowledges its counterhegemonic resistance to capitalist commodification. However, Romanticism’s initial manoeuvre to isolate and defend a poetic faculty against a de-humanising capitalism, evolves into a concept of the literary as self-contained entity, extricated from socio-political and -historical contamination. In short, resistance to capitalism’s commodification effect produces an alternative status quo in the form of the literary. The Romantic concept of the literary draws a veil over the political status of literature, and thus wields its own ideological influence over the analysis and explication of texts.

The practice of West Indian criticism is often realized in the context of a struggle between Romanticism’s ideological influence and the reassertion of literature’s participation in existential realities. Therefore, criticism is always a simultaneous argument between the ideological positions broadly defined as formalist at one extreme and socio-historical at the other, as well as an analysis of the literary work. Thus the analysis and explication of the literary work may also be read as an implicit critique of the polarities of literary theory, acknowledging literature’s participation in ideology and existential reality, or veiling such participation.

In ‘Caligula’s Horse’, Walcott construes deconstruction as a threat to the integrity of the poetic imagination without differentiating among deconstructionists. Indeed, critics such as Paul De Man and Harold Bloom do not fundamentally threaten the security of the imagination’s retreat, but perpetuate its putative status as politically and ideologically inert. Their deconstructive praxis promotes the ‘blindness’ of all attempts at interpretation and meaning; reading is always ‘mis-reading’. If referentiality and meaning are taken out of the world, then nothing is left but the imagination, the mind contemplating the impossibility of meaning and truth. This form of deconstruction may be understood as a re-direction of Romanticism. In other words, the idiosyncratic and irrational nature of the Romantic imagination now turns itself upon the world rather than away from it. The threat of a rational, ideological world is diffused by a neo-Romanticism which construes such concepts as meaningless misreadings.

Stephen Heath for example, considers the Yale School’s privileging of Romantic texts, and states:
It is always useful ... to consider literary theory in terms of the works it privileges... Deconstruction operates theoretically over all texts... At the same time, there has been in its development in literary theory a particular privileging of Romantic texts...

Thus a particular type of deconstructive act masquerades as revolutionary practice when indeed it is more properly understood as a secondary phase of Romanticism. As Heath indicates, Paul de Man argues for deconstruction’s subversion of the established canon of literary works while writing on Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats and Rousseau. In this way, Heath argues: ‘Upsetting the canon here is, in fact, the valuation of ‘literariness’, a valuation which can thus ironically renew quite traditional versions of literary autonomy.’

Admittedly, deconstruction, even of the Yale School type problematizes the organic unity and symbolic integrity of the Romantic imagination; however, as already indicated, deconstructionists such as de Man and Bloom destabilize structures of meaning and interpretation in a manner which re-affirms the authority of the poetic imagination. Their practice subverts the rationality of cause and effect, and the political force of historical event. The anarchic chaos of Bloom’s ‘misprision’ and de Man’s ‘blindness’ ensure the interminable jouissance of the imagination by enveloping existential reality in a cloak of linguistic arbitrariness and instability. Their dismantling of all positions, ideologies and meanings functions as the authoritative discourse subverting all other discourses. Thus ironically, an obscure positivity is derived from a systematic process of negation. Truth resides in the act of negation, a position quite similar to Walcott’s approach in ‘Caligula’s Horse’ and ‘The Muse of History’ or indeed, Wilson Harris’s privileging of the metaphysical realm, that imaginative Empire which subordinates existential reality. In effect, Walcott and Harris are theoretically closer to the Yale School of deconstructionists than might be readily apparent. Somewhat reminiscent of Said’s latent Orientalism, this imaginative retreat functions as a constant despite the variables in manifest (i.e. socio-historical) reality. Walcott’s ‘Caligula’s Horse’ and ‘The Muse of History’ characterize history as a type of anti-hero engaged in an epic struggle with the heroic, creative imagination. The literariness of history (i.e. history as limited and limiting literature) is foregrounded almost to the exclusion of the history of literariness. As a result, the ideological nature of literature and literariness becomes obscured. Literature is made to appear outside and above socio-political and ideological concerns, when indeed it is always intimately involved with existential reality.

Significantly, Walcott and Harris theorize against an adversarial history. Their anxiety of influence, is precipitated by Eurocentric history rather than by poetic precursors as in Harold Bloom’s case. Walcott and Harris struggle to overcome history through literariness; the social, economic and
political world is subordinated to the exigencies of the literary. Bloom on the other hand, locates anxiety within literariness itself rather than in any quarrel with history. Despite the similarities indicated earlier, it is this shift in the location of creative anxiety that marks the difference between critics like Bloom, and theorists like Walcott and Harris. Walcott rages against deconstruction, despite his own deconstructive method in 'Caligula's Horse', precisely because the socio-historical residue in his deconstructive act conflicts with Bloom's and De Man's deconstruction. Where Bloom’s and De Man’s subversion of meaning and interpretation operates in a socio-historical context that all but guarantees their selfhood, Walcott deconstructs the prose of politics and 'First World' deconstruction in a socio-historical context that emphasizes his otherness. Walcott’s destabilization of meaning has to resist such destabilization where it threatens the literary construction of his selfhood. Bloom and De Man can engage a wholesale deconstructive activity which destabilizes even the concept of the Self, since their subversion occurs in a socio-historical context that corroborates their selfhood. An act of jouissance for Barthes or De Man or Bloom becomes an act of survival, resistance and re-creation for Walcott and Harris.

Thus deconstruction serves significantly different ends for Walcott and Harris than for Bloom and De Man. The socio-historical divergences between the 'Third World' and the 'First', the existential differences between the colonized and the colonizer create the possibility of deconstructive critiques with radically different results despite a shared methodology. The socio-historical categorization of the 'Third World' as victim, mediates the deconstructive practice of a Walcott or Harris; they deconstruct history to re-construct selfhood. Indeed the inherent contradictions always threaten the delicate balancing act which characterizes their approach. Both Walcott and Harris appear to emphasize form as a means of attenuating a socio-historical context that undermines their selfhood. Formalism masks the socio-historical impact of 'Third World' ontology. On the other hand, Bloom and De Man employ deconstruction to promote the fallibility, if not impossibility, of meaning and interpretation. They implicitly subvert Walcott’s and Harris’s attempts to re-construct selfhood by indicating that all efforts at construction are always already disintegrating. Thus the formalism which Walcott and Harris employ to subvert a 'Third World' history of conquest and subjugation is deconstructed by Bloom and De Man. Implicit in such Yale School deconstruction therefore, is a re-assertion of traditional versions (i.e. 'First World' versions) of existential reality, since there are no critical tools to re-assess and reconfigure 'Third World' history, which cannot themselves be deconstructed. In other words, Bloom and De Man also veil the socio-historical context by emphasizing formalism, but unlike Walcott and Harris, they do so, not to assert the selfhood of repressed otherness, but to highlight the futility of constructing selfhood. Their version of deconstruction veils its own reactionary political
stance in the guise of apolitical procedure, as it attempts to subvert the politics of resistance inherent in Walcott’s and Harris’s approach.

It is not co-incidental that a discussion of the politics of West Indian criticism dwells upon deconstruction and an assessment of some of its Anglo-American proponents. Intertextuality is as relevant to literary theory and criticism as it is to the literary text. Thus, as we have seen, Derek Walcott, whom we generally acknowledge as poet rather than theorist and critic, is implicitly admitting the hegemonic impact of post-structuralist theory on West Indian literature, and by extrapolation, on West Indian identity construction.

Indeed, the ideological conflicts in West Indian criticism are not merely between a West Indian formalist and a West Indian socio-historical approach – to engage an old cliche, it’s not merely Walcott vs Brathwaite. As we have only partially examined in this discussion, West Indian criticism reveals its own internal conflict between formalist and socio-historical concerns. In addition, West Indian theoretical and critical issues simultaneously engage metropolitan theory, and the nature of this engagement provides additional criteria to assess the politics of West Indian criticism.

NOTES

5. Walcott, p. 141.
8. Walcott, p. 142.
15. Stephen Heath, p. 43.
In the apocalyptic final scene of Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, the Old Man signals his intention to operate on the Cripple with the words: 'Now, let's see what makes a heretic tick'. This statement expresses one of the play's most insistent concerns: the connection between language and power, or, perhaps more accurately, between linguistic play and political resistance. As such, *Madmen and Specialists* is a key play in any discussion of the relationship between post-colonial literature-in-English, which by its very nature raises the issue of the political function of language, and post-structuralist theory, which spends so much of its time rehearsing the links between discourse and power. In this paper I will quite deliberately adopt a post-structuralist strategy and attempt a dialogistic reading of *Madmen and Specialists*: firstly, I will strategically deploy a tool crafted from the theories of Foucault and Derrida to re-forge the play's political critique, a critique underestimated because of the theoretical blindness of the Soyinka orthodoxy to date; and, secondly, I will use the text's claims as drama, as a text written for potential performances, to then interrogate the theories themselves, and any claims they might have to either universality or totality. Through its self-reflexive foregrounding of the subversive role of performance, the play serves to 're-materialize' theory again, re-placing it within the material practices that re-produce it, and re-inscribing it upon the performing body of the neo-colonial subject, thereby preventing it from ever being finished or closed. Such a reading might show that the question of the relationship between post-colonial text and (potentially) neo-colonial theory is a complex, dialectical one: that no theory writes triumphantly upon a theory-less, pure pre-colonial space; and that any use of such theory must be specific, strategic and self-conscious.

The application of metropolitan literary-theories to post-colonial texts is a controversial issue in current theoretical discussion, and post-structuralism, in all its varieties, is one of the chief bones of ideological contention. However, it is important that we do not conflate two different objections to the use of post-structuralism in discussing post-colonial texts:
that is, there is an argument against European theory in general, and one, a more serious one perhaps, against post-structuralism in particular.

The first argument warns against the ‘Eurocentric’ nature of such theories; what Soyinka has called their implicit (and explicit) ‘missionary’ function. Helen Tiffen and Stephen Slemon put it well in a recent collection of papers on the issue: ‘“Theory” – after Europe – becomes a discursive tool by which dominant culture ideologically reinscribes its imperial centrality.’ However, that is not the end of the sentence, for Tiffen and Slemon go on to say: ‘and yet, for all that, “theory” remains a potentially enabling mechanism for furthering the continuing practice of post-colonial critical resistance into new vectors.’ To try and claim a theory-free zone for post-colonial literature is doomed to failure: the practice of post-colonial criticism is already a battleground for contesting European and American theories. Indeed, as Chidi Amuta has argued for Africa alone, the neo-colonial market place offers the critic a wide choice of theoretical hats, ranging from Leavisite practical criticism to a Marxist materialism of the most mechanistic kind. Indeed, to argue that such theories can have no validity to post-colonial literature is to ‘other’ the ‘native’ once again, fixing her/him as once again being essentially and naturally ‘different’ from ‘us’. The danger is that such theories can become new orthodoxies themselves, claiming to have the one true Word instead of the timely, strategic, and above all, materialist ‘heresy’ with which arrogant cultural priesthoods can be unseated.

However, post-structuralism has its particular risks. The warnings against its uncritical use are loud and legion. Craig Tapping, for example, notes that ‘despite theory’s refutation of such absolute and logocentric categories as these – “truth” or “meaning”, “purpose” or “justification” – the new literatures ... are generated from cultures for whom such terms as “authority” and “truth” are empirically urgent in their demands’. Similarly, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra have noted the implicit tendency in post-colonial theory for ‘Political insurgency ... [to be] ... replaced by discursive radicalism’, and for the ‘post-colonial’ to be ‘reduced to a purely textual phenomenon’. These criticisms, and there are numerous others, are well aimed: post-structuralism can easily end in making the specific, local struggles of post-colonial peoples just another scene in the great play of difference. Nevertheless, it must also be said that some of the ‘common-sense’ assumptions subverted by post-structuralism are alive and well and holding court in post-colonial literary debate; among them the notion of an authentic, essential voice, the idea of ‘presence’, the virtue of representation and the search for an organic tradition as an alternative to that of Eliot, Arnold and Leavis. These dogma reify the practice of literature, separating it from the exploitative, oppressive apparatus of the neo-colonial society in which it plays an important part. The discourse of post-structuralism, when used strategically and with awareness of its own 'con-
structed' nature, can help re-materialize post-colonial literature, re-placing it within the material institutions which produce it as a 'discourse'.

Dismissed so often as pessimistic, nihilistic and/or absurdist, *Madmen and Specialists* is not a play a critic immediately thinks of when searching for an example of the post-colonial text. For example, Obi Maduakor, in linking the play with the work of the absurdists, comments that 'pessimism and cynicism have been nurtured to a point in both Soyinka himself and the characters that discussion and meaningful exchange are thought to be unnecessary'. However, if approached not in search of essences or identity, but from the perspective of post-structuralist theory, the play can be seen as more radical than wrist-splitting. It is ironic, given Soyinka's own well publicized distrust of European theories and their 'missionary' potential that so much of *Madmen and Specialists* seems to echo the concerns of French post-structuralist Michel Foucault's: the concentration on the figure of 'the specialist', the concern with 'practice' and the ironic play on what we might call, after Foucault, the 'politics of truth'. Moreover, the concern with 'priesthood' of the power-elite, with the religious function of language, and with the gaps within language, reminds the reader of the work of yet another French post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida.

In a paper this size, is impossible to deal with these theories in any great detail. However, I am more interested in appropriating some of the concepts and insights of these theories in the interest of a re-staging of *Madmen and Specialists*, than with providing an adequate reading of the theories themselves. What I find useful in Foucault's work is his linking of power, discourse and knowledge. Power, he argues, does not principally act repressively, but productively:

> it doesn't weigh on us as a force that says no, but ... it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

The way this power works is through a whole 'network' of 'technologies' of power, which involve the 'surveillance', 'discipline' and even the 'production' of the 'subject' him/herself. In books dealing with some of the most significant of these 'technologies', Foucault has detailed the social production of the institutions of medicine, madness, criminality and sexuality. The importance of these 'genealogies', as Foucault calls them, is that they show how the modern state itself works in detail, common to both so-called capitalist and communist states. Here a rigidly Marxist analysis fails to detail both the scope of the issue, and also to deal with power's 'specificity, its techniques and tactics': the way it works 'concretely'. Where Soviet socialist power was in question, its opponents called it totalitarianism; power in Western capitalism was denounced by the Marxists as class domination; but the mechanics of power in
themselves were never analysed. In a sense, a Marxist response is not 'materialist' enough, failing to detail the way in which 'power' actually marks the body of social subjects. This is a particularly valuable aid in reading Soyinka, for one of the strongest political criticisms of his work is that it is also not 'materialist' enough.

What these technologies establish, moreover, are what Foucault calls 'regimes of truth'. In this sense, "Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. Here Foucault's concentration on 'discourse' is especially useful, for it reminds us that what a society deems 'true', its 'knowledges', is a matter of language, and not just language operating in a vacuum, but as part of a whole material, economic, and political network of material 'practices'. Foucault continues to list some of the characteristics of the current Western 'regime':

Truth is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, not withstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles).

The title of Soyinka's Madmen and Specialists itself turns on this very problematic: the link between institutions and discourses of normalization, incarceration, recuperation and knowledge. I would argue that 'the specialist' becomes an even more crucial figure in a post-colonial 'regime of truth', where the demand for such knowledge is so immediate and urgent, and the supply so much less reliable.

The work of Jacques Derrida is perhaps even more elusive than that of Foucault, and the two approaches are certainly not to be seen as being in fundamental agreement. However, Derrida, like Foucault, argues that power is very much a question of language. Indeed, it might be argued that Derrida goes further than Foucault in showing how the 'will to power' is integral to the production of language itself:

the play of differences involves synthesis and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present.... This linking, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.
This play of presence and absence, where meaning is produced through an active ‘difference’ from a presence always ‘deferred’, is given the name ‘differance’ by Derrida.18 By showing that no sign carries within itself the grounds of its own authority, Derrida is able to ‘deconstruct’, through meticulously close reading, those places/spaces in utterances where the structure deconstructs itself; where its claims for closure or totality are shown to depend upon the very term it marginalizes or denies. While the various strategies Derrida uses to undertake this operation are not in any sense identical, they do have the common virtue of showing how linguistic power carries with it its own hubris. Whether through the ‘trace’ of some prior term, or through the ‘supplement’ which displays the insufficiency of the main body of the text, the ‘metaphysical’ discourse is shown to depend on its ‘other’ for its very existence:

All metaphysicians have proceeded this ... good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure.19

Significantly, while all discourse must in some degree be ‘metaphysical’, Derrida has traced the dominance of one kind of metaphysics in Western culture: that which he labels both ‘logocentric’ and ‘phonocentric’, and by linking this with the related term ‘phallocentric’, he is able to show the links between linguistic, political and sexual power.20 The partnership between the primacy of the Word and the authority of the Father lead us rather obviously to Soyinka.

For, like metaphysical discourse itself, Madmen and Specialists is based on a series of oppositions: moreover, these oppositions centre on the issue of the appropriate practice of ‘knowledge’: between ‘traditional’ father and ‘rebellious’ son; between professional/specialist and the marginalized women/abnormal; and between inside/outside or colonized and colonizer. There are two central traditions of ‘specialization’ in the play: one, which is carried in the male line from Old Bero to his son, and which centres on the key, neo-colonial title of ‘Dr’; and the other which is passed from mother to daughter and stresses the primacy of the ‘earth’ and its seasons.

The battle between father and son in the play should not blind us to their essential identity: they both see knowledge as being a matter for individual transcendence and freedom. In other words, the Father has bred the Son: in the individualistic, idealistic search for truth of the Father is the will to power of the Son; in the Christ-like speciality of the hero-artist-redeemer-professional there is the megalomaniac ‘madness’ of the son. The Specialist is literally the ‘son’ of Soyinka’s own characteristic Ogunnian heroes: the celebration of the individual will to ‘power’ taken to its logical conclusions; the ‘Will to know’ even the taste of death. In Old
Bero's passion for the need to 'choose', there are the seeds of his son's passion for 'Control'. In the father's willingness to try anything with argument, there are the beginnings of Bero's own, more sinister experimentation. If the play questions who is the real 'madman' of the title, it also problematizes the issue as to who is the play's chief 'specialist'. It is the concept and practice of 'specialization' which is the issue here: and the cult of individual mastery and elitism it embodies.

Moreover, it is a 'specialization' which speaks also of both metaphysics and colonialism. In Bero's frantic search for the 'name', a quest parodied by his father and ridiculed by Iya Agba, we see the need for the masterword which Derrida sees as the characteristic of metaphysical discourse. Similarly, Bero's quest for transcendent knowledge can be seen as linked to his neo-colonial status as a 'Dr'; for in the neo-colonial social formation both power and knowledge are seen to reside elsewhere, within the heart of light at the colonial Centre. By linking this hunt for the single, original and originating Utterance to the torturer's demand for his prisoner's withheld secrets, the play is able to foregrounds the important link between linguistic and more obviously material 'power': 'you analyse, you diagnose, you prescribe' (MS, Part One, p. 248).

Against the 'specialists', the Old Woman offer a more collective, humble vision of a knowledge linked to the earth and its rhythms: 'We move as earth moves, nothing more. We age as Earth ages' (MS, Part Two, p. 273). They accuse Dr. Bero of abusing the resources the earth has lent him: 'They spat on my hands when I held them out bearing gifts' (MS, Part Two, p. 283). The play dramatically emphasizes the different basis for the mothers' knowledge by having two 'sisters' who complement each other rather than battle for individual power.

However, what would seem a rather simplistic antithesis between kinds of practice is complicated by the presence of a third group, who operate in the transitional space between the surgery and the Mothers' hut. The Mendicants are descendants of other scapegoat figures in Soyinka's work, like Ifada in The Strong Breed and Chume in The Trials of Brother Jero; but here we see a significant strengthening of their role in the drama. The Mendicants work for both Bero and his father: they do the work of the generals while parodying their behaviour; they are incarcerated but they also guard the play's chief prisoner. In other words, far from being merely passive scapegoats, they actually are the means by which the 'specialists' maintain their control. In this sense, as Michael Etherton points out, they can be seen as embodying not merely 'ideology', but the more sophisticated notion of 'hegemony'. However, the play goes further than this, because, like Foucault, it identifies where this 'hegemony' is chiefly maintained: that is, within the circulation of 'discourse', or around the search for 'truth'. Here we must further identify 'As' itself.

The paradoxical role of 'As', it being both power language and the parody of that language, has tended, not surprisingly, to confuse the
play’s critics, as it does Bero himself. In attempting to answer the special-
ist’s tortured question, ‘What is As... Why As?’ (MS, Part Two, p. 266) critics have usually seen it as ‘either/or’ the discourse of liberation or enslavement. Aderemi Bamikunle sees it as ‘the revolutionary movement by which the Old Man tries to open up the minds of the masses to the abuses in the social and political system’. Oyin Ogunba argues that it is ‘the force of tradition in a particular society’. However, rather than seeing it as ‘either/or’, it is best seen as ‘both/and’: that is, the power of ‘as’ is the propositional notion of the word itself: its protean power of definition; the productive, and thereby limiting, power of discourse. Aafa, not surprisingly as the play’s clergyman the chief spokesman of ‘As’, gives us its history:

In the beginning was the Priesthood, and the Priesthood was one. Then came schism after schism by a parcel of schismatic ticks in the One Body of Priesthood, the political Priesthood went right the spiritual Priesthood went left or vica versa ... the loyalty of homo sapiens was never divided for two parts of a division make a whole and there was no hole in the monolithic solidarity of two halves of the priesthood ... they remained the sole and indivisible one... (MS, Part Two, p. 289)

This pseudo-history which is essentially ‘a-history’ makes it clear that the actual content of the religion or ideology, whether it be Christianity, Ifa, communism or capitalism, is not actually its important or enduring component; what matters is the function that content serves: the maintenance of power itself. However, this also clearly involves the maintenance of the Priesthood, the bearers of knowledge, through their command of the priestly language: the Old Man, in one of the play’s climactic speeches, enacts how language makes its own meaning through marginalization: how the maintenance of power depends on the productive, alienating power of language itself; as the speech puts it in Foucault’s own terms, on discursive ‘practice’. It is not for nothing that the Specialist is described as a specialist in ‘THE TRUTH’, who orders people to ‘SPEAK’. (MS, Part One, p. 230)

Practice...on the cyst in the system.../ you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood, oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp-post of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO OF NOTHING. (MS, Part Two, p. 292)

Old Bero’s conscientization of the Mendicants enacts the linguistic decon-
struction enacted in the above speech: it is Bero’s guards themselves who becons his greatest threat, the physical ‘mock of democracy’. Here we see Derrida’s ‘differance’ being performed; the ‘othering’ process of linguistic
and social production also becomes the ‘absence’ or ‘supplement’ on which the apparent self-sufficiency of the whole can be fragmented: ‘shut that gaping hole we fall through it’ (MS, Part Two, p. 292). Or, in Foucault’s terms, every site of power also makes available the possibility of its own (limited) ‘resistance’.

Once again, this ‘resistance’ is shown not to be merely linguistic or theatrical, although its theatricality is an essential element of its power. In earlier Soyinka plays, the death of the artist-redeemer merely brings about a change of consciousness; here, it is the community itself who pass sentence on the Beros and then carry out that sentence. Even more significantly, they carry out that sentence in terms which foreground their claim to an alternative tradition of ‘knowledge’ and ‘discourse’; and their sentence includes both father and son in its fire.

As I have already commented, it is also significant that the act of judgement co-incides with the Circus’s most convincing performance: where Father does seem to ‘become’ the Son and the Cripple is more than metaphorically ‘practiced’ upon. The full force of the alternative the mothers offer to the words of the specialists is expressed theatrically: that is, through the text-in-performance. It is the subverting ‘discourse’ of the Mendicants’ mime, their satirical songs and puns, and, finally, the insistent, recurring undercurrents of their chant which fatally challenges Bero’s efforts to ‘proscribe’ and ‘prescribe’ knowledge and language. Bero is at his most frustrated when he cannot ‘shut up’ the surplus of his own ideology: the maddening ‘ticking’ of his heretics. The Mendicants’ very repetition, ‘re-presentation’, of the acts of torture come to represent for him, and the audience, the futility of his own claim to ‘control’. In this sense, the chant is a performative sign of the community’s own refusal to be contained in the ideology of the dominant culture: the ‘gaping’ hole which will not be shut.

It might well be argued that the mothers themselves represent an essentialism which threatens my ambitious claims for Soyinka’s implicit ‘post-structuralism’. However, this misses the point. For, if Madmen and Specialists shows radically the link between ‘power’, ‘discourse’ and ‘knowledge’, it also can be seen to be offering a vital post-colonial critique of the conservative ‘dog’ within any post-structuralist dogmatizing. Included within the ranks of the specialists must be the theoretician himself (I use the pronoun advisedly). The mothers speak on behalf of the material ‘effects’, that is, the usefulness of any knowledge in a given context. Rather than damning the specialist for being a specialist, they judge him for what he has done with the knowledge that the earth has granted him: ‘what is used for evil is also put to use.’ This is the message of the ‘poison’ parable: ‘Poison has its uses too. You can cure with poison if you use it right. Or kill’ (MS, Part One, p. 233). Judged with the ‘earthly’ knowledge of the mothers, the specialist’s use is seen to be in its effects,
The Tick of a Heretic

'ab-use'. Rather than any simplistic relativism, the play offers an extremely materialist and practical view of the value of any knowledge.

To this end, the value of *Madmen and Specialists* as a play is to even further 'materialize' these insights, or 'knowledges' of theory’s discourse. It is to 'write' the 'body' back into the power/knowledge/discourse formation. What the play shows is not only how discourses of knowledge are used to produce, contain and alienate the body, but also finally how inadequate the discourses are in containing those bodies. In the grain of the mendicants chanting voices, in the subversive grotesqueness of their clowning, in the audio-visual power of the play’s final scene, discourse, even counter-discourse, is shown its own hubris. The binary between madmen and specialists is not finally decided in favour of either, but in favour of a third 'knowledge' which stresses the materiality, the unavoidable political implication, of any discursive practice.

In this sense, the play is both post-structural and post-colonial; for it shows how the discourse of liberal, romantic individualism often celebrated by Soyinka himself works to marginalize the objects of that discourse; and how any theory, no matter how useful, is open to 'abuse'; and how any metaphysics, no matter how idealistic, eventually will be confronted by the ominous, explosive ticks of its own heretics. The doctor of literature, the specialist 'Africanist', finds the patients will not lie still on the page-table, but insist on conducting their own medicinal dances. Similarly, through the grotesque 'Circus of As', *Madmen and Specialists* shows the unique role performance can play in the co-operation of such heresies.

NOTES

1. All references to the play are from Soyinka, W., 'Madmen and Specialists', in *Six Plays*, (London, 1984), pp. 221-294. Future references will be in the body of the text.
2. The concept is Bakhtin's; however, I am using it here to express a reading strategy in which the route of criticism travels in both directions simultaneously. I use it in preference to the term *dialectic*, which implies a kind of serial progression.


11. Foucault, p. 119.


15. Foucault, p. 133. For a full elaboration of Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse’, see his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.


18. Derrida, p. 28.


24. In a sense, both the bush medicine of the Mothers and the clowning of the Mendicants can be seen as analogous to what Foucault has termed the ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’. Cf. *Power/Knowledge*, p. 81.

25. Central to the opposition between the father/son and the sisters is the question of the link between the politics of meaning and the politics of gender. Here communal/revolutionary/material knowledge is seen in terms of the ‘feminine’, and Dr. Bero’s opposition to it a fear of the feminine itself. The full elaboration of this reading is the subject of another paper.
Hope never knew Horizon— ... Moving on
in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night,
though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness—
(Dickinson; L 871)

Moving on in the dark like some ghostly train in the desert, Agha Shahid Ali’s *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* charts a painful passage through wastes of history and nature on the way to Hope, an ever-receding horizon illuminated by the cold sapphire glimmerings of evening stars. His Night Train pursues an impossible destination that he names evanescence, the vanishing point and moment when fixities evaporate and possibilities waver is in the air to condense, through poetic resolve, into rare forms of ephemeral beauty like Black Iris in the wilderness.

Fascinated with moments of change, transition – and, ultimately, transport – Ali is a sublime poet, as well as a student of the American sublime, particularly practitioners like Dickinson and O’Keeffe, whose voices contribute to the rich texture of *A Nostalgist’s Map*. Ali’s stark, yet sublime, poetics are well served by his choice of the American Southwest as the predominant ground and object of his writing. His subjects – lost tribes and vanished villages, vast deserts, geological epochs and cataclysmic changes – are able to support a resonant vocabulary of loss and desolation, as well as the mythic subtexts informing many of his poems. In the wasteland that he scours for traces of life and shards of history, the desert is a particularly apt scene of writing, being both the staging ground for sublime effects and the testing ground for his poetic powers. Indeed, one significant concern of *A Nostalgist’s Map* is the nature and efficacy of the poet’s vocation in the modern wasteland. Ali’s sojourn through the American Southwest represents a period of trial during which he faces the severest test of a poet of the desert: the temptation to lose faith with the desert, to give up, or give out, in the face of stark desolation, to arrest movement and court death – or worse, in terms of his poetics, to resolve the dispersive force of the sublime into a settled representation of some
transcendental reality – some mirage of Truth, Beauty, or Art. He resists such reassuring closure and the last temptation: to consolidate a broken human world into a version of Self, writ large. Indeed, his poetry works in quite the opposite way; it shatters the Self and its comforting illusions, and subverts the historical understanding on which it depends.

The dispersal of Self into alien voices, the shattering of History into myriad stories is exemplified by ‘Eurydice’, the poem which prefaces A Nostalgist’s Map, introducing many of its motifs. Set in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany, ‘Eurydice’ is startling in conception and execution, even though its central strategy – retelling the myth of Orpheus from the perspective of Eurydice – has been anticipated by Rilke, Rich, Atwood and others. Powerfully evocative of the holocaust – the crippled Eurydice ‘limping to Hell’ past ‘howl-choked dogs’ to disappear ‘in a sudden/tunnel of mustard twilight’ – the poem could trouble some who might feel that it cheapens or exploits, sensationally, a horrific event. Admittedly, ‘Eurydice’ flirts with the aestheticization of violence cultural historians decry in Nazism, yet, throughout the poem, aesthetics itself is put on trial, as Ali self-consciously reflects on the limitations of Art and the Artist under permutations of the Modern State (a concern of ‘I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror’ as well). Orpheus is portrayed as dis-engaging from life and the living, while his art is shown to be, at best, ineffectual, at worst, escapist, or even collusive with an oppressive fascist regime.

‘Eurydice’ invites and repays a second and third look, yet, as reading it can be a profoundly unsettling experience, the poem is judiciously placed outside the book’s four-part arrangement, a tightly woven, interlacing structure reworking motifs from ‘Eurydice’ – of loss and separation, of departures and arrivals, of infidelity and flickering Hope – into a tapestry depicting the spiritual topography of the desert and other wastelands.

Part One of A Nostalgist’s Map re-introduces the motif of sudden arrivals and departures, as figures wander through landscapes and human ‘worlds’ emptied of life, meaning, and significance. Striving ‘only to connect’ in the modern wasteland, human figures – and in particular, the figure of the poet – are betrayed by fragile shelters and false securities: personal relationships, religion, the routines of everyday life. ‘Beyond the Ash Rains’, a poem in which the speaker is promised never again to be exiled from his beloved’s arms, is immediately followed by ‘A Rehearsal of Loss’, in which the speaker departs from his lover never to return. ‘Crucifixion’ witnesses the death of religion and religious faith, as a driver enters and leaves a timbered forest, oblivious to the futile attempts of Penitentes to incarnate a god. The meaningless loss of their brother, lying in a secret grave, has its counterpoint in the meaningless life of the driver who travels unawares past the violent scene of crucifixion and death, discovered and only partially redeemed in the poet’s re-visiting. The second look, or regard, of the poet is the explicit theme of ‘Leaving Sonora’, in which the speaker, flying over the desert landscape, is momentarily
arrested, as the lights of Tuscon fade, by the vague outlines of a vanished village.

The absence of certainties and sureties in Part One initiates the poet's search for evanescence in Part Two. The section begins with the title poem, 'A Nostalgist's Map of America', in which the poet tropes the figure of turning and re-turning, playing off Dickinson's 'A Route of Evanescence', in particular its first two lines: 'A Route of Evanescence/ With a revolving Wheel.' Turning over in his mind an endless summer shared with a friend now dying, the poet attempts to redeem their loss and fulfill his pledge, made years before, to keep in touch and write, before their lives took separate turns. 'A Nostalgist's Map' testifies to the limits of language and art, which fail to take the measure of suffering and are powerless, even false, before death, yet it also records the poet's necessary fidelity to loss, as well as his struggle to remember the past without falsification or sentimentality. If I have any quibble with the volume, it's that its title is misleading – Ali rarely is nostalgic and, in fact, warns against the condition. Of course, acts of recollection inevitably risk this danger, and perhaps by naming nostalgia in his title, he hopes to inoculate both himself and his readers from a condition springing from fundamental dis-ease.

A better title might have been 'In Search of Evanescence', after the eleven-part poem of the same name, which follows 'A Nostalgist's Map of America'. Breathtakingly varied in technique; richly allusive, referencing Dickinson, De Quincey, O'Keeffe and others; resonating with phrases and images that are modulated subtly in different contexts, 'In Search of Evanescence' is a tour de force, too complex to do justice to in a summary. In terms of reference, section #9 brilliantly captures the tone – whimsy married to tragic seriousness – and form – staccato phrasing – of Dickinson, as well as the sublime perspective of O'Keeffe, when the poet takes imaginary passage on a Night Train in the Desert with his sick friend, Phil. Moving from the 'station of Faraway Nearby', past Pink and Green Mountains, Black Mesa, Ghost Ranch Cliffs, and Vast Nights with Lightning, the train approaches Light Coming on the Plains – which, appropriately in a poem on evanescence, recedes, then vanishes with no apparent apocalypse or reassuring closure; in this section, even art fails, its distancing formalisms giving way to a human voice in pain. Yet, as a unit, the poem – in essence, a posthumous letter to a friend – keeps the poet's promise to write and fulfills his duty to remember, and, in doing so, effects a partial redemption of loss. In this regard, lines from section #11 are especially apt: 'there's everything in this world but hope' and 'there's nothing in this world but hope', the sentiment underlying Part Three of A Nostalgist's Map as well.

Entitled From Another Desert, Part Three consists of thirteen poems which, like 'A Search for Evanescence', are variations on a theme, this time, the poet's search for the Beloved. Based on Urdu and Persian
redactions of the Arabic story of Qais' love for Laila, *From Another Desert*, though pared down and apparently simple, is richly textured, each image freighted with the weight of the traditions Ali draws upon. (The figure of the Beloved, for example, representing lover, friend, God, the Revolution.) A translation into a new context – another desert – of themes and motifs from the first two sections, *From Another Desert* is enriched by, and enriches, the poems preceding and following it, and is a perfect example of how *A Nostalgist's Map* gathers density, richness, and complexity as it unfolds. Significantly, Part Three raises the question of the poet’s relationship to the political order, most notably in poems #9 and #6. Poem #9 imagines Majnoon (another name for Qais, meaning ‘mad’ or ‘possessed’) excluded from a Persian miniature in which a world of privilege revolves without him. The scene is a royal hunt; riding the tiger, Prince Jehangir, his coat glistening with ‘Ruby buttons .../ drops of blood/ that have caught him by the collar’, will not dismount into Majnoon’s wilderness of sorrow, a world of keenly experienced injustice. Yet that wilderness is inspiration for the poet, who, in poem #6, is ‘ready to face doom’ and write, in blood, the world’s sorrows, his knowledge gathered from the silences of history’s victims, his art intimating Revolution and the end of injustice.

Part Four revisits the American Desert, yet continues Ali’s interest in retelling the story of history’s victims. ‘I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror’ powerfully evokes the memory of the vanished in Chile after the coup deposing Allende. Beginning with a startling image – ‘I see Argentina and Paraguay/ under a curfew of glass, their colors/ breaking like oil’ – the poem records the speaker’s efforts to shatter complacency and the mirror of official truth which glosses over and sanitizes other, sometimes horrific, realities. His is a desire to tear ‘the skin off the glass’, unsealing oceans that will sweep away frozen representations, leaving in their wake the traces of other histories. His dream of drowning, a wish for destruction and re-creation, is also a desire to recover the voices and stories of the forgotten from the flotsam and jetsam of history. Giving voice to those who have been silenced is the conscious strategy of ‘Medusa’ and ‘The Youngest of the Graeae’, poems, which like ‘Eurydice’, offer alternate versions of the ‘true’ or ‘official’ stories recorded in myth and legend. The three Gorgons of ‘Medusa’ and the three sisters of ‘The Youngest of the Graeae’, foreshadow the three white-haired women of ‘Desert Landscape’. Backward and forward looking, gazing at death, while facing the dawn, these women of the desert are dark Grace figures, Ladies of Sorrow who raise up and elevate through the harsh ministrations of suffering. Evoking a memory of water in the hollow shell she brings to her ear, one woman anticipates the attitude of the speaker in ‘Snow on the Desert’, who recalls a memory of oceans in the desert’s severe formations. In a context of change and transition, traced geologically in the desert’s history and personally in his sister’s hurried departure from Tucson, the speaker
experiences a moment when past and present collide, resulting not in
Revelation, but in re-collection and a quiet calculus of loss and gain, a
poet's reckoning of 'everything the earth/ and I had lost, of all/ that I
would lose/ of all that I was losing' at the moment of evanescence.
At the finish – and all the way to the end of the line – A Nostalgist's Map
of America is a thoroughly accomplished volume, evocative, haunting, and
almost tragically beautiful. Its design and execution is equally impressive;
like the artwork of that other poet of the desert – Georgia O'Keeffe – A
Nostalgist's Map of America is a study in chromatics, a reworking of images
and motifs in subtly varied hues and shades of difference on large,
multiple canvasses. It invites and rewards careful reading and re-reading:
Agha Shahid Ali's Night Train on the Desert gains power at every turning
and provides its riders with wonderful passages and transport.

WORKS CITED

W.D. Ashcroft has observed that ‘worlds exist by means of languages’. Languages make possible the expression of far more than words and stories: they provide the means through which entire belief systems, entire cultural realities are given form, expression and terms of reference.

In Papua New Guinea, a country of great cultural and linguistic diversity, questions of language are inevitably political. The total population numbers 3.8 million, yet there are over 800 languages and many distinct cultural groupings – in a land area of 462,840 square km. A major contributing factor to this linguistic complexity is the ruggedness of the land, which prevented and still to some extent hinders) contact between different areas.

The government’s language policy has privileged Hiri Motu, English and Tok Pisin as the three official languages of Parliament, and English has for many years been the language of education and administration. Vernacular languages are currently enjoying a higher status with the Education Department’s recent proposal to begin primary schooling in selected vernaculars and introduce English later. This proposal aims to keep children connected to their cultural roots – a connection which has proved more and more tenuous for at least two generations who were schooled in English.

The views of Papua New Guinea’s writers are vitally important to any discussion of language choice and use. Their voices are all the more significant in this, the International Year of Indigenous People.

Most of the writers I have interviewed see language choice as a political issue with very practical implications for themselves and for their country. John Kasaipwalova, whose writing was prominent in the ‘first wave’ of Papua New Guinea literature, considers the choice of English is political in the sense that this is what we’ve inherited, but this is not going to last all the time.... Sooner or later ... we will be in schools learning Bahasa Indonesia, learning Japanese. so it's really just a matter of time. English is just the fact of predicament at the moment because all our schools and teachers when we started off happened to be English-speaking. (interview 24.9.92)
William Takaku, Director of the National Theatre Company, has a similar viewpoint:

It is a political issue. political in the sense that it is a decision that you are not a party of as a writer or as a person here. First of all, you are forced to accept that you can only communicate in English. That’s political.

In the sense that the government of the land has decided that this is the language of instruction?

Yes. in that sense it is political and destructive. After all, what we try to say in English, we can say and relate much better in our own languages.... English is a continuation of neo-colonisation. You know: keep going, people may look different, but the attitudes are the same. There’s change on the surface, but it does not affect the spirit. English is a continuation of colonisation and exploitation by the British Empire. (interview 23.9.92)

It comes as no surprise to find that much of Takaku’s work with the National Theatre Company makes use of Tok Pisin and a range of vernacular languages.

Adam Delaney, a young writer who chooses to work either in English or in Motu depending on his target audience, notes that language choice has only become a political issue in Papua New Guinea since colonial times— and specifically since the Government’s commitment to have a language policy:

We’ve survived for thousands of years using the languages that we’ve had. It’s never been an issue. I think the mentality’s got to go away from people.... It’s not a political issue. I think the only reason it’s political is that Parliament wants it that way. Parliament has decided that we’ll have the three languages, and the people who have the tools and the power to speak in those languages now use it as a political tool. (conversation 22.10.92)

Two other young writers, Louiaya Kouza and Steven Winduo, assert (in sharp contrast with William Takaku, quoted earlier) that English is a natural language in which to express themselves. Loujaya Kouza, who had a collection of poems published in 1978 when she was 15, continues to write poetry and songs while working as a journalist and reporter. She comments that writing in English is ‘a natural phenomenon ... I was weaned on English’ (personal communication, June 1992).

Steven Winduo, who began writing in the early 1980s, was closely involved with the Papua New Guinea Writers Union in the mid-80s, and had a poetry collection published in 1991. He describes English as his ‘thinking language’. While recognising the importance of his native Boiken dialect and other vernaculars, he notes:
The problem is that these languages are facing destruction.... I've spoken English most of my life, and Tok Pisin. I was born into my dialect but I can't speak it now, because I've been constructed to speak English.... I think in English or Tok Pisin, depending on the situation. But interestingly, I write in English before I think in Pisin.... But it's even more complex. With literary work, most of my reading is in English, so I think in that culture.... And every aspect of my professional life [as a lecturer in the Language and Literature Department at the University of Papua New Guinea] happens in English. (interview 6.10.92)

Winduo explains that he writes in English 'for political reasons':

Writing in English is a political issue in the sense that I'm using that language to bring the other languages to that level also.... When you see one of my texts, you'll see that it's all constructed in English, but within that construction there are other languages. They ... play a very significant role in that these are parts that make up the whole discourse, the whole text. It's not as if English is playing a dominant role, it plays an accommodating role, perhaps diffusing other languages. I'm using it more as a channel for these other languages.

So it's playing more of a collaborating role rather than a dominating one?

Yes. So it's a very political thing. To quote Chinua Achebe, language bears the burden of my experience. Whatever language I use, it communicates, it carries a lot of my burdens, it's a self-justifying thing. (interview 6.10.92)

By contrast Russell Soaba, a relatively prolific writer who has continued to publish since the early 1970s, comments that he uses English as a medium of expression out of choicelessness.... English is the only language made available to us in its wider scope as far as audience is concerned. I myself feel I have no choice but to use the language, to write it. But the difficult thing about English is that it's a matter of mastering the language, as you would any language.... Well, that's the only language that I write in. I can't write in any other. (interview 25.8.92)

Generally Papua New Guinean writers have not experimented widely beyond the conventions of standard English, except to incorporate vernacular words into texts, as both Soaba and Winduo have done. Two writers whose work consciously makes use of different English registers and codes are John Kasaipwalova and Nora Vagi Brash. Kasaipwalova's story 'Betel-nut is Bad Magic for Aeroplanes' moves smoothly through a range of registers, accurately capturing the speech styles of different people at Jacksons International Airport outside the national capital, Port Moresby. His story 'Bomanus Kalabus 0 Sori 0!' achieves a similar, uniquely Papua New Guinean effect. This effect is likely to be short-lived, however, according to Kasaipwalova:
When I want to give something for a universal audience, for my children, and grandchildren later to come, I cannot do that because by the time they get to read it, they will not understand the Papua New Guinea English that is spoken. (interview 24.9.92)

Poet and dramatic satirist Nora Brash, who is equally fluent in Motu, English and Tok Pisin, explains that she writes in all three languages and allows the context and the audience to dictate her choice.

I see language as a political weapon. The people who live in town use English.... I think ... it is essential that one writes in the language the people know best. If I'm writing for the village audience, I will write in Motu.

The High Cost of Living Differently is a little play ... set in Tabari Place, or Koki, anywhere that people gather. The character is what white people would call an eccentric fellow. We would call them funny people: funny in that they make people laugh and so on. And the man talks in his own language: it's not English/ or Motu, or Tok Pisin, it's his own English. Everyone can understand what he's talking about. He's climbing a mango tree, he sees a beautiful juicy ripe mango. On the other side of the tree is this snake with its mouth wide open, ready to swallow a frog. The man watches the snake with its mouth open, and he's so frightened when it swallows the frog because he thinks he might be next in line. So he jumps out of the mango tree, leaves his laplap hanging there and tells the people what happened in his elaborate English. Then someone suddenly realises he's naked. He says, ‘Oh, what are you doing without your laplap?’

‘Oh, I forgot. I left my laplap in the tree.’ He uses that sort of language, and people who gather in markets, that's their sort of language so they understand it.... That's how I use languages in my work. I think language should suit the audience. (interview 13.4.92)

The work of John Kasaipwalova and Nora Brash illustrates a phenomenon which W.D. Ashcroft has described:

One of the most interesting features of post-colonial literature is that kind of writing which is informed by the linguistic principles of a first language or an English moulding itself out of a peculiar (post-colonial) relationship to place. This is an ‘overlap’ of language which occurs when texture, sound, rhythm and words are carried over from the mother tongue to the adopted literary form.9

Possibly related to what Ashcroft is describing here, is an experimental dramatic genre which the National Theatre Company has developed, as reported by William Takaku:

We've tried to develop actions where languages will not matter. We're trying to discover this kind of drama. There's one play we do about a land dispute. The characters come in with their own language – tok ples.10 But we know what we're talking about. So in that way we use a lot of languages in our performances. (interview 23.9.92).
The voices of Papua New Guinea's writers gain a particular resonance from the unique cultural and linguistic diversity which typifies their country. In 1993, when the world's attention is focused on indigenous people, their message is all the more timely.

NOTES

2. Also known as 'Pidgin English' or simply 'Pidgin'.
3. In the course of my M.A. thesis research I spoke to seven writers in the Port Moresby area. All of them are quoted in this article.
8. Both locations are in Port Moresby.
10. 'Talk place', a generic term meaning any person's vernacular language.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM is from Sri Lanka and is of Dutch Burgher descent. 'My major preoccupation,' she said, 'has been with the vast, the immeasurable tragedy of a country at war.' Her most recent collection was a book of poetry, *Reddened Water Flows Clear*. She also contributed a chapter to *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*.

PETER BAKOWSKI is an Australian poet living in Melbourne.

DIANA BRYDON is professor of English at the University of Guelph, Canada. She is a leading critic in the field of post-colonial studies and has recently published, with Helen Tiffin, *Decolonizing Fictions* (Dangaroo Press).

GORDON COLLIER teaches at Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany.

MARCELLE FREIMAN was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1951. She lived in London from 1976-1980 before migrating to Australia in 1981, and now lives in Sydney with her two sons. She is currently writing a thesis on post-colonial fiction at Macquarie University. She has taught creative writing, and has had poetry published in a selection of Australian journals.

GILIAN GORLE is an Australian and teaches at the Pacific Adventist College, Boroko, Papua New Guinea.

GLYNE A. GRIFFITH is from the Caribbean. He obtained his doctorate from the University of Queensland, Australia, and now teaches at the University of the West Indies, Barbados.

ASHLEY HALPÉ is one of Sri Lanka's most distinguished poets and critics. His most recent collection is *Homing and other poems*. He is at present Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

GITHA HARIHARAN lives in New Delhi and has recently won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Published Book, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Her first collection of short stories, *The Art of Dying* (Penguin) has just been published.

MARGARET HARRIS has had stories and plays broadcast regularly on the BBC. She is married to the distinguished novelist and critic, Wilson Harris.

ULLA JOUSSEN is a post-graduate student at Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany.

CHANDANI LOKUGÉ is from Sri Lanka and has recently obtained her doctorate from Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. Her first collection of stories, *Moth and Other Stories*, was published this year by Dangaroo Press.

LYN McCREDDEN teaches at the University of Melbourne, Australia.
MARK MAHEMOFF is an Australian poet living in Sydney.

DAVID MOODY teaches at Murdoch University, Australia.

LAWRENCE NEEDHAM is a Research Associate at Oberlin College. He has published on Indo-Anglian poetry and the rhetoric(s) of Romanticism. Currently he is researching the impact of British expansionism on the production and reception of English literature from 1789-1832.

NICHOLAS THOMAS is Queen Elizabeth Research Fellow at the Australian National University, Canberra.
KUNAPIPI
International Arts Magazine

FICTION
Jean Arasanayagam, Gita Hariharan, Margaret Harris, Chandani Lokugé.

POETRY
Peter Bakowski, Marcelle Freiman, Ashley Halpé, Mark Mahemoff.

ARTICLES
Lyn McCredden, 'Mapping the Maternal: A Reading of Contemporary Australian Fiction and Society'; Diana Brydon, 'No (Wo)man is an Island: Rewriting Cross-Cultural Encounters within the Canadian Context'; Nicholas Thomas, 'Gender and the Politics of Tradition: Allan Duff's Once were warriors'; Gordon Collier, 'Multicultural Self-Definition and Textual Strategy in the "Poetic" Prose of Derek Walcott: The Nobel Prize Speech'; Glyne A. Griffith, 'Veiled Politics in West Indian Criticism'; David Moody, 'The Tick of a Heretic; or, on Using the Poison of Theory in the Post-Colonial Operation'; Lawrence Needham, 'In Pursuit of Evanescence: Agha Shahid Ali's A Nostalgist's Map of America'; Gillan Gorle, 'Writing in English: Freedom or Frustration? Some Views from Papua New Guinea'.

INTERVIEW
Elizabeth Jolley.

COVER
Drawing by Jean Arasanayagam.