

IN DIALOGUE WITH POETRY

Edited by Robyn Rowland

I find it exciting to read prose written by poets exploring their own processes in poetry, the value and purpose of poetry, its meaning – what poetry is to them, and sometimes what it should be to others! Often they creatively engage with issues of craft; sometimes with the mystery of the moments of creation. Understanding their own work and the work of others is part of their exploration of the poetic life.

I am often struck by their sense of surety in this, a kind of fearlessness of opinion. In the established poets, there seems no anxiety about ‘fitting in’ or being in ‘fashion’. They don’t see this positioning of their opinion as something they need to be careful with. Debate is seen as important, useful and engaging.

Zest is keen to bring its members some of that lively engagement with poetry from our own Australian poets. Each month we’ll be selecting a prose quotation from a poet and asking one of our own poets to respond. The selection will be eclectic and will cover a range of approaches to poetry.

The brief is as follows:

‘Please respond to the quotation in your own way. You are invited to agree or disagree with it, interpret it and explore. It can be an agreement/extension or a disagreement/argument or both. It can relate to your own work and processes or to the work of others you admire in what they have said on poetry. But I don’t want an essay on others, rather on what YOU think and believe about poetry in relation to the issues raised in the quotation given.’

The Poet: Susan Hawthorne

Susan Hawthorne is the author of two collections of poems *Bird* (1999) and *The Butterfly Effect* (2005). She was also in a Penguin four-poet collection, *Four New Poets* with *The Language in My Tongue* (1993). Her poetry has been published in literary journals and newspapers in Australia (among them *Westerly*, *HEAT*, *Meanjin*, *Poetrix*, *Blue Dog*, *Island*, *Overland*, *Arena*, *The Australian*, *The Age*) and in the USA, Canada, Algeria, Germany and the UK. She has a poem in the *Best Australian Poems 2006*, work in a Mattara Award collection *The Sea’s White Edge*. Her work has been broadcast on PoeticA and The Box Seat (ABC Radio). She has read at conferences and festivals in Australia, USA, India, Korea, Canada, New Zealand, UK,

Netherlands, Spain, Bangladesh and Israel. She is also the author of a novel and several non-fiction books. She is a Research Associate at Victoria University where she has supervised PhDs and MAs in poetry, fiction and publishing. She has worked in publishing for more than twenty years, the last seventeen as Publisher at Spinifex Press where she has begun an eBook initiative. See an eBook version of *The Butterfly Effect*, go to: http://spinifex.acp.dpsl.co.in/Home/html_spinifex/moreinfo.asp?bookid=536934968

Poet in Prose: Audre Lorde - 'Poetry is not a luxury'

I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean - in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity for our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

...

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.

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Poet in Dialogue: Susan Hawthorne. 'Poetry is not a luxury. Poetry is a cow'

I first read Audre Lorde's essay, "Poetry is not a luxury" in *Sister Outsider* in 1984 when I had the task of getting her to agree to come to Australia for "The Language of Difference", a ten-day women writers' festival held at the Abbotsford Convent in September 1985. Lorde's essay had a profound affect on me then and it continues to do so, although inevitably I read it differently today as a poet than I did then as a young woman wanting to be a poet.

Audre Lorde was no quiet type, indeed before she arrived I heard many stories of what might happen in Melbourne. I waited hours at the Melbourne Airport for her delayed arrival. Here would be the infamous Black Lesbian

Warrior (with caps). African-American, she was a dissident citizen, protesting the US invasion of Grenada in 1983. She was proudly a lesbian, long before there was any element of fashionability. She saw her warrior self as a single-breasted Amazon who had survived the early ravages of breast cancer that would ultimately claim her life. And here she was walking through the doors of Customs in a tight fitting bright yellow jumper that hugged her single breast. Brave, I thought. And admirable.

Against all expectation, we found more in common than either of us had anticipated. We both had sea-faring Scottish grandfathers who had captained ships crossing the world's great oceans. Not luxury liners, but working ships.

For women, she writes, poetry is not a luxury. Nor can it be for any writer whose work is deemed to be written from the margin. Audre Lorde not only responded to this positioning, she challenged her readers to celebrate it. In an interview that she did with poet Adrienne Rich (also in *Sister Outsider*), she points out that she was "against the wall" because of homophobia in the Black community. Adding to that the complexity of racism and anti-feminism, her decision to be up front was one she felt she had to make in order to be the poet she wanted to be.

As a poet whose work has so often centred on the nameless, poetry has enabled me to think. First of all as a reader, as feminist poets gave me words to think the unthinkable. The pirate edition of Robin Morgan's *Monster* was for me the equivalent of earlier manifestoes of men's revolutions, but *Monster* was more open, multi-leaved full of anger and passion. "May my hives bloom bravely until my flesh is aflame / and burns through the cobwebs. / May we go mad together my sisters." Judy Grahn's *The Work of a Common Woman* with its refrain, "the common woman is as common as a loaf of bread and she will rise" also seemed to be speaking directly to me. Audre Lorde took me to a new mythological landscape. "Bearing the drums on my head I speak / whatever language is needed / to sharpen the knives of my tongue" (*The Black Unicorn*, p. 11)

For feminist poets, for lesbian poets, poetry is not a luxury liner to board, sit back on the deck, and sip champagne. Poetry is work. With poetry, we dig new foundations on which to build the architecture of our lives. As a poet, I have drawn on my life, spoken of things that almost every relative I have would prefer remain silent. But silence is itself a distortion. For me, it is necessary to "raise storms, kick up eddies of chaos on the edge of the fathers' psyches" (*The Butterfly Effect* p. vii). Why write poetry if it moves no one?

The tricky balance for a feminist poet is to find the words in any language that will hold down the thought. As Lorde writes, where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. That language can be

the one we grew up with or another. Sometimes, in the process of learning a new language we come to see new ways of speaking.

Let's take the word cow. An ordinary English word, or is it? The English word "cow" has almost the same sound as its Sanskrit predecessor, "gau". The voiced g of Sanskrit has shifted to the unvoiced c of English. I've been fascinated with the poetic nature of cow for a long time, there are so many mythological twists and turns to its history. In the Rg Veda there is a reference to: the first of the first dawn, in the cow's home was born the great eternal (in Thadani, p. 23). My mind turns to galaxies (Gk gala: milk) and the great cow who must have spilled the milk that has become the Milky Way. The connection between Sanskrit and Greek is very close, not just linguistically but in their mythical structures too. Giti Thadani has an even more radical idea: that the two cows who appear in many places in the Rg Veda (and as Sanskrit has a dual there can be no mistake about the number) are metaphors for women lovers. At this point, I wonder whether Gertrude Stein had any knowledge of Sanskrit with her statement, Alice had a cow. The cow that Stein was referring to is an orgasm. Germany and France are the European homes of Sanskrit scholarship, so perhaps in her milieu she encountered the idea of sacred fluids, milk, cows and orgasm.

There is no question that Suniti Namjoshi was familiar with the Indian sources and with the centrality of the idea of the cow when she wrote *Conversations with Cow*. This is a story about an ordinary everyday lesbian separatist who makes friends with Bhadravati, a Brahmin cow in a Canadian meadow. Namjoshi's "self sustaining community of lesbian cows" and Thadani's idea that the cow might be associated with sexual desire between women sent me down another path, in the footsteps of the gopi. The gopi are the milkmaids of Hindu tradition. The gopi appear in the Bhagavatapurana and Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*. The gopi are the handmaids of Radha, they live in the forest and hang about with Radha while Krsna is gallivanting elsewhere. My thought, what if there is more to these gopi than meets the eye?

Here I am being distracted by my passion for Sanskrit (and cows) when I should be concentrating on what Audre Lorde has to say. It's that I both agree and disagree with her. I agree with her representation of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience. Poetry distils experience in the way that a good malt whiskey is the concentration of all that grain; poetry takes experience into tiny places, words. Much as I agree that the white fathers have distorted the word poetry into sterile word play, word play in itself need not be sterile. Far from it, it can be a way of seeing new horizons, it can help us to write of the nameless. The gopi, for example, could they be a kind of girl gang? Perhaps they have a lot in common with Suniti Namjoshi's Bhadravati. And this is where I meet up with luxury again.

It's risky to use a word like lesbian in a poem. Almost everyone would prefer namelessness. But whose problem is that? If no one attempts to change the

language, if we simply fall over with the weight of cultural expectation where does it leave us? Every poet writing from a margin - and one must ask whose margin is it - faces this dilemma. Can we carve our words truly from the rock of our daily lives, or should we let it run like water over a rock face, prepared to wait thousands of years for that change to happen? Do we pander to the needs of public consumption?

My rock is made of the cow I walked behind in the dusty paddock of my childhood, the same cow who bunted me in the stalls when I got too close. It is the cow I met in the poems of Gertrude Stein and Suniti Namjoshi. It's the cow I hit on the road driving to visit my father after my mother's death, the cow who almost landed in my lap. It's also the cow I've remet in Sanskrit, almost as if crossing back through that dusty paddock.

The cow, of course, has become code. It has become a way of speaking out of turn. The skeleton in my closet is a cow.

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