Title: Desperate Times, Desperate Poetry: (Un)Australian Refugee Poets in a Post-9/11 Australia

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Abstract

In the decade since the terrorist attacks of September 11 in the US, Australia has become a country where the global political discourse surrounding the “War-on-Terror” has infiltrated our very understanding of ourselves as a nation. Fed by anxieties regarding race and domestic security, refugees and asylum seekers have become the focus of political debate that has been dominated by rhetoric that constructs them as threats to the national wellbeing and has resulted in incessant calls to “Stop The Boats”. The term “un-Australian” has become a device used in many such debates to insinuate that those who challenge the dominant discourse are somehow irreverent of “Australia values”. This article will argue that resistance writing, in the form of poetry, in a time of cultural crisis is crucial because it disrupts the overriding narrative. Writing directly from their own personal experience of displacement and imprisonment, this article examines the work of refugees whose poetics reflect a real lived-in experience that challenges images of Australia as a nation of egalitarianism and mateship and argues that political poetry is essential for expressing the reality of cultural displacement and social injustice experienced by mandatorily detained asylum seekers in Australia. The power of the poetic form is not only that it provides a platform for political commentary for otherwise muted voices, but also because it creates a rupture in reality, a space where truth can be redefined and the power of language deconstructed. Furthermore, these un-Australian poems inspire a motion towards change, change that can diminish the desire for conflict and advocate a rejection of the doctrine of difference.

Article

Poetry is not just a series of words used to describe a person’s thoughts or feelings; rather poetic expression strives to explore the very depths of the human condition by transcending the mundane or the everyday. However, contemporary poetry is distinguished from other poetic forms because it seeks to investigate the human condition by placing itself firmly within everyday experience. In this paper I will explore contemporary Australian poetry that addresses a specific experience - that of the everyday life of the refugee poet in contemporary Australia - and argue that by merging personal reflection with political critique, the poetic form can be
appropriated to interrogate injustice. Furthermore, I will argue that for these poets, the personal cannot be distinguished from the political; rather the emotional life of the poet is inseparable from their political experience. A brief history of political poetry and the debate surrounding its value, as a form of poetic expression, will be followed by a critical examination of the Anglo-centric formation of Australian identity and how it informs the current socio-political environment in Australia. Then, a close examination of the poems “Australia” (2006b) and “Your Terrorist” (2006c) by Ali Alizadeh, “Interloper” (2007) by Mohammed Reza Zandavar, and “Difference” (2010) by Mohansen Solanty Zand will demonstrate how the merging of the personal with the political creates a discursively beautiful and timely poetic voice with the power to deconstruct the dominant discourse and act as a spark to ignite social change.

In 1991, Australian poet Bruce Dawe observed that there has been a long-standing bias amongst the literary elite against verse as a “public form” in favour of “personal or lyric expression” (1). Rather than being looked to as being an avenue for asking the big moral questions of the time, Dawe claims that many literary critics would prefer that poetry steer clear of overtly political issues, instead focusing on lyricism and self-reflection (1991:2). Some poets, who believe that politics should be kept out of verse entirely, support this bias. Recently, poet John Whitworth asserted that political poetry has “[t]oo much message, not enough beauty” (2011:17). Yet the personal and political need not be mutually exclusive; for even in self-reflection, poets have the ability to capture the mood of a nation. As the poet Shelley once said,

Poets measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are . . . astonished at its manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age (2004: 90).

Holding a mirror up to the face of a nation, poetry reflects precisely its emotional life, regardless of its beauty or terror, and can therefore be considered a political act in itself.

Throughout history great poets have made significant contributions to campaigns for social justice by addressing the political concerns of their time. In the nineteenth century Shelley’s poems urged the populous to protest the Peterloo Massacres, in the twentieth century Yeats cursed the British occupation of Ireland (Rees 2007: 33), while Anna Akhmatova bravely critiqued the Stalinist regime in Russia. In more recent Australian history, Judith Wright championed the rights of Indigenous Australians and migrant poets such as Peter Skrzynecki, while Ania Walwicz and Ouyang Yu alerted their readers to diaspora and racism in the Australian community by writing about their personal experiences. In reflecting on social injustices of their day these poets, along with many others, have found inspiration for both themselves and their readers. To do otherwise would have been, as Adrienne Rich puts it, acting “as if poetry /could stand outside history” (1986: 35).
That is not to say that poetry’s worth can only be measured by its engagement with the external world; rather, it is a poem’s capacity to provoke a response in the reader that characterises its value. As Roberta Lowing observes, an essential part of the best political poetry is the infusion of the personal in order to emotionally engage the audience with the wider political message (2010). Philosopher Theodore Adorno believed that a truly “radical, committed work of art” - like the political poem - aspired to disrupt dominant narratives (1962: 96). Through providing a platform for political commentary, by otherwise muted voices, political poetry possesses the ability to “firmly negate empirical reality” and in doing so becomes “part of the solution” (Adorno, 1962: 96). Reflecting on and critiquing their experience as political subjects, poets measure and record the human condition in its historical and social context, not only documenting the history of human society as certainly as any historian, philosopher or sociologist, but communicating a vision with the power of moral imperative. Therefore, in desperate times of social crisis, what is called for is the desperate act of the political poem, imbued with the potential power to elicit change.

In March 2003, social commentator David Marr sparked considerable furore by challenging Australian writers to “shake off the new philistinism of John Howards Australia” (2003:2). Marr also claimed that, “so few” Australian writers “address in worldly or adult ways the country in which we live”; preferring to reflect on an Australian identity firmly entrenched in our colonial past (2003: 3). This kind of Australian identity has been both built and perpetuated by mythologies of *terra nullius* and the construction of ‘Australianness’ as white (Anderson, 1991: 36). Australian literature and poetry has also been characterised by the representation of a specifically ‘Anglo-Australian’ experience: the trope of the Aussie battler, bushman and soldier resonate throughout Australian literature and poetry, as well as popular culture (Elder, 2007: 25). These myths of mateship and triumph over the harsh and unforgiving landscape have not only been instrumental in defining and constructing our collective national identity as white, but also imagine Australia as an inclusive nation, that offers a ‘fair-go’ to all (Elder, 2007: 6-8). These narratives of nation create a false reality, or what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community” (1991:28). As demonstrated in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s “Australian Values Statement” Australia continues to imagine itself as a cohesive nation with “a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need” with “respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual” (2012). This illusion has come to be accepted as truth and any challenges to it are deemed un-Australian.

Homi Bhabha observes that it is in times of “social crisis . . . fractures” begin to appear in “collective national identity”, and that in the ensuing struggle, its “true constructed nature” is revealed (1994: 3-4). Contemporary Australia has become a country in social crisis, as the political meta-narrative of the global War-on-Terror has infiltrated the very understanding of itself as a nation, undermining our so-
called values of a ‘fair-go’. Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 that sparked the War-on-Terror, Western nations (including Australia), fed by anxieties regarding race and national security, have (re)mobilised a reductive binary discourse - outlined by Edward Said in which the goodness, freedom and civilisation of the west is positioned in opposition to the evil, repression and barbarism of the east (2010: 1558).

One of the results of this overtly reductive worldview is an Australia in which innocent people, including children, seeking refuge are locked up behind razor wire for years, without trial or hope. Australia, despite being the most sparsely populated on the planet, received only two per cent of the world’s asylum seekers last year and refugees arriving by boat continue to be a particular fear in the refugee-obsessed Australian political arena. Regardless of the fact that refugees who travel to Australia, without prior authorisation in order to seek asylum, are not in violation of any domestic or international law, they are mandatorily detained. Positioned as “unassimilable” into the Australian body (Perera, 2009: 648), refugees and asylum-seekers become threats to the order of Australia by narratives that construct them as a group of “queue jumpers, illegals and potential terrorists”(Giannacopoulos, 2005: 29). The refugee suffers trauma and persecution in their country of origin and in detention is stripped of political subjectivity, reduced to what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare-life” (1995: 171): reified, powerless, stateless, segregated from family, denied access to legal counsel, and proper medical care (Genel, 2006: 27). Even if released into the Australian community, refugees often feel victimised and vilified. Furthermore, the exclusionary bio-political practices of detention centres towards refugees extend outside its spatial confines by means of “provisional and limited inclusion”, such as temporary protection visas or exclusion from welfare and other social services (Palombo, 2009: 622). Yet Australia continues to claim to be a “fair” nation that is not only “compassionate to those in need” but also “embraces cultural diversity” (“Australian Values Statement”, 2012).

Looking at contemporary Australia in this light, it is necessary and timely that poetry responds, acting as an autonomous cultural agent, looking “Australia in the face without flinching”, even at the risk of being considered un-Australian (Marr, 2003: 4). The following works of contemporary refugee poets reflect a real lived-in experience that disrupts the dominant narrative of Australia as a nation of egalitarianism and mateship. Instead, these poets expose a conflicted nation gripped by fear, deep in denial of a past steeped in brutality. Somewhat ironically similar to the colonial experience of the Australian landscape as harsh and unforgiving, they paint a vivid picture a nation both unwelcoming and inhumane.

In 1976, at age thirteen, Iranian-born Ali Alizadeh and his family fled to Australia as political refugees. Alizadeh describes his “high school years as being marred by his classmates’ racism, the difficulties of adapting to a mostly hostile environment, and the trials of learning English” (Alizadeh, 2008). With a PhD in writing,
Alizadeh has now published multiple critical essays and books of poetry, and is the editor of Cordite Poetry Review. The two poems “Australia” and “Your Terrorist” are taken from his book Eyes in Times of War (2006). As the title suggests, this collection provides ways of ‘seeing’ external wars - wars such as the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Australian history and culture wars, and the War-on-Terror - while simultaneously exploring the poet’s own internal struggles caused by negotiating multiple and often conflicting subject positions.

Alizadeh’s proudly un-Australian poem, “Australia” (2006b), exposes incongruities in the dominant national narrative. Appropriating the platform of writing on the national theme, it joins other poems called “Australia” by writers such as Bernard O’Dowd (1903), A.D. Hope (1943), Ania Walwicz (1981), and Peter Goldsworthy (2004). Alizadeh’s poem is a caustic interrogation of modern Australian cultural identity that effectively pares back the imagined national ideal to expose brutal truths, while simultaneously revealing underlying ambiguities. The poem begins with the poet’s vision of Australia’s past, current and future socio-cultural landscapes.

To achieve your grand freedom
You’re destined to shackle others

in perpetuity. To renounce
your heritage of imprisonment

you shall turn the Others into
criminals. . . (44)

Noting that Australia has a history, since colonisation, of sequential spaces used for detention - penal colonies, Aboriginal missions and prisoner of war camps - the poet reveals a country haunted by spectres of such a past. Furthermore, he claims that this “heritage of imprisonment” provides the framework where a “grotesquerie / of banishing of refugee children/to desert cages” - in mandatory detention centres - and the “horror of transforming the land’s/original inhabitants into persecuted/outcasts” - through strategies such as the Northern Territory Intervention, seem justifiable and perhaps even inevitable (44).

Repeatedly we hear Australia imagined as a nation of tolerance and diversity. "Australia is not a racist nation" is echoed, from the mouths of politicians, community leaders and sports people. Yet the poet charges Australia with playing “xenophobia/hide-and-seek” behind words like “multiculturalism”, mocking its “laughable allusions to fairness” (45-46). “Racism? Don’t/ be dull . . .” (45), here Alizadeh sarcastically acknowledges the complacency in the idealised view of Australia as the perfect model of multiculturalism and accepts the futility of merely calling a country in denial “racist” (45). Rather he asks the reader, as a
personification of Australia, to voice the reasons for the nation’s seemingly pathological “xenophobia” (46),

... Tell me 
_{schadenfreude_} or catharsis? Revenge

most likely. Asian and Muslim

asylum seekers must reimburse

the insults your forefathers suffered

on the convict ships. The Aborigines

shall be wiped of their land since

you were exiled from yours . . . (45)

Moreover, it challenges the reader to recognise that contemporary Australian fear of the Muslim Other did not just materialise post-9/11, but is firmly rooted in a history of relentless persecution of Indigenous Australia and unfounded anxiety regarding our Asian neighbours. This fear, the poet claims, is intensified, rather than alleviated, by a continual and rather pathetic “Oedipal” clinging to “Mother England” (46). The poet’s Freudian consideration of the Australian subconscious is a more than appropriate approach to addressing a national amnesia that prevents our country learning from its past. By suggesting that perpetual self-mythologising narratives, that refuse to address the realities of history, form the framework that support current injustices, the poem effectively performs what Nicholas Jose terms “the double task of reckoning with the past in order to intervene in the present” (2009: 6).

The poem's true effectiveness lies in the fact that rather than acting as merely a polemic denunciation of contemporary racism, it crosses spatial and temporal boundaries to provide the reader with an exploration of the foundation for the current imagined fears of White Australia and its perceived threat of the Other.

In his essay, “The Emergency of Poetry”, Andrew Joron argues that resistance poetry in a time of crisis is crucial precisely because it “forces language to fail, to fall out of itself, to become something other than itself” (2002: 3). Alizadeh’s poem “Your Terrorist” (2006c) effectively demonstrates this, exposing what Michel Foucault called the “deceit of language”; that is, language as a system of meaning that equates words with a false set of cultural assumptions that become “permanently established in the realms of truth”, therefore enabling the “uninterrupted continuation” of hegemonic power structures (2001: xi). The opening of “Your Terrorist” is abrupt and direct, “You call me a barbarian. / I call you master”(21). This immediately and affectively locates the power, and thus meaning creation, with the “you” (reader) of the poem, while the “I” becomes the disadvantaged speaker.
You don’t speak my language.
My words

Noise in your ears; my poems
meaningless melodies.

Your poems
masterpieces of literature. (21)

Here the poet notes how, in English, truth and meaning has been traditionally located in the “masterpieces of literature” that are set in stark contrast to his own “meaningless melodies” (21). However, Alizadeh also suggests that the “melodies” of the “barbarian” only sound like “[n]oise” not because they are without worth, but because of the listener lacks the capacity to understand the language of (an)Other (21).

Somewhat ironically, the poem treats the so-called “terrorist” as a theatrical trope - the speaker of a Shakespearian-style monologue. The poet adopts a traditional form of English poetry - the couplet - that paradoxically has also been used for resistance writing in Persian culture for over one thousand years. Alizadeh links his couplets not by rhyme but by “inter-stanzaic enjambments” that act to viscerally “bleed” one powerful and disturbing image into the next (Mokhtari, 2011).

Me, I’m naked

and paraded as a prisoner
on your catwalks. I’ve been

defeated, dispossessed, and now
detained in the cages

of your metropolis. I can’t remember
if I ever had my own culture

because your powerful voice
has deafened my memories. . .(22)

Stripped of language, culture and belief, the “dangerous alien with/incomprehensible language” becomes the abject terrorist. Alliteration further underscores his wretched position, “defeated, dispossessed and . . . detained”, immobilised by normalising structures that enable “the lexicon of . . . inferiority”(22-23). Additionally the poet unmask...
... shackles

are called Security; your war
Operation Freedom; your cluster bombs

food parcels for my children (23)

The poem ends with the unnerving suggestion that the “monster”, that we name “terrorist”, is ultimately a nightmare of our own creation. The power of language is that it can name refugee as “terrorist”. It is from “behind bars” that the “barbarian” comes to understand that power is located in the language of his captor, “your language/ O master, your words/are essential to . . . survival” (23). By exposing the disjuncture, caused by the intersection of language and power, this poem becomes “truly political art” (Alizadeh, 2008).

Poet and critic Carolyn Forché argues that when the personal subject connects with the political subject it creates a rupture that can be described as a “third space” (1993: 17). Poetry situated within that indeterminate space challenges simplistic notions of truth; she terms this kind of writing “poetry of witness” (17). Refugees in detention are bio-political and as such cannot help but inhabit such a (non)space. Asylum-seekers create what Agamben calls a “biopolitical fracture” (1995: 179), because, as previously noted, they become threats to the order or ‘life’ of Australia’s nation-state by discourse that continually constructs such groups as unassimilable into the Australian political body (Perera, 2009: 648). Doubly displaced from both country of origin and country of refuge, the poet in detention is paradoxically both intimate with the political world and exorcised from it.

Writing directly from his own personal experience of political displacement is poet Mohammed Reza "Tony" Zandavar who, until his release in 2004, spent over five years in Port Hedland and Baxter detention centres. His poem “Interloper” (2007) appears in Another Country, collection of works, compiled by Sydney PEN, from writers imprisoned in Australian detention centres. As is the case of many writers in detention, Zandavar believed that in fleeing a totalitarian regime he was coming to a liberal country where freedom of religion and expression was not merely tolerated but celebrated (Scott, 2008: 40). Instead, as the poem’s title “Interloper” suggests, he finds himself an unwelcome intruder, a trespasser. Zandavar’s poem echoes the bewilderment, frustration and fear inherent in unjust detention.

Time passes, the clock strikes three times
And no bird opens its plumage
Into my fright.
My shout does not disturb (13)
The poet’s fearful insomnia sits in contrast with a nation in denial; deep in what Ommundsen calls a “multicultural sleep”, undisturbed - even by the cries of the unjustly imprisoned (1998: 596). “It is silence – silence, silence / No dawn for this starless night” (13). The three clock strikes are ominously repeated in strikes of “silence” – a seemingly endless nightmare without any hope of “dawn”.

Addressing the reality that we live in a country where people sew up their lips in acts of courage and desperation - revealing not only their own voicelessness but the falseness of law, the deceit of language, and the breaking of the human spirit - the poet confesses, “My lips are sewn with lowliness / And my tongue is buried / In the tomb of my mouth” (13). Yet Australia’s leaders condemn the fraught act of lip-sewing, labelling these protests as “futile”, “disturbing” and “un-Australian” (Hudson, 2010; Schwarz, 2004: 211). Rather than admit the desperation of such an act is a valid response to extended mandatory detention of people not guilty of any criminal act, politicians, such as Immigration Minister Chris Bowen, accuse these asylum seekers of offending Australian sensibilities saying, “This is distressing for me and will be distressing for most Australians” (Hudson, 2010).

Based on a spurious British sovereignty founded in mythologies of terra nullius and lacking any concrete framework, the theatrics of politics are above all hype, fantasy and temporary escapism, cleverly used to conceal the tenuousness of its legitimacy. Indigenous author and critic Alexis Wright observes that such “escapism is nothing new for a nation that was formed on the basis of denying the truth” (2008:130). The poet astutely observes,

They – who wear the nice clothes and the polished shoes  
Run the political buffoons opera.  
Earth’s residents chew the sincerity  
And are free in their slavery  
And spin cotton wool for their ears. (13)

Symbolic of all detained refugees, the poet remains in darkness, voiceless and sidelined in a surreal gothic drama complete with “tragedy-coffins”. A fiasco of law and political grandstanding, the “buffoons opera” is acted out to a paradoxically “captive” audience that is ultimately unmoved and unresponsive, deafened to the cries of the imprisoned by political “spin” (13).

The quality of this poem lies in what Paul Hasluck describes as “experience and utterance joined one to another in the best way” (1975, p. 15). Bearing witness to his physical powerlessness and personal tragedy the poet simply states, “I am heavy hearted”, “I am tired” and “I am alone” (13). Located in the liminal space between personal plea and political protest, this poem embodies the spiritual, emotional and corporeal experience of detention while implicitly asking the reader for justice (Scott, 2007: 5) - “without you, freedom/ The world in extreme darkness is as tight as a prison” (13).
Another contemporary poet of witness is Mohansen Solanty Zand. As a young clerk of the Military Courts in Iran, he was issued with a death warrant after exposing corruption in the legal system (Alizadeh, 2009). Fleeing to Australia he spent a total of five years in detention. Zand’s poems have been published in journals such as *Southerly* and has also released an audio recording of his poetry called *Australian Dream* that appropriates the voice of ‘real’ Australian actors whose distinctive ‘Aussie’ drawl disrupts the listener’s assumptions regarding the clearly un-Australian themes and perspectives of the poems (Alizadeh, 2005). Zand’s poem “Difference” appears in his recently published collection *Inside Out*. Fellow refugee poet Alizadeh observes that what is impressive about Zand’s poetry is his ability to “articulate and confront the paradoxes in the west versus east dichotomous paradigm” (Alizadeh, 2005).

Dichotomous meaning is created through language because we understand things by pairing them with complementary opposites that define one another through negation. In this doctrine of difference one term becomes privileged over another, with that term usually taking primacy of place – good/evil, us/other, civilisation/barbarianism. The poem “Difference” subverts such over-simplistic meaning-making strategies by appropriating the dominant reductive binary discourse, but confusing the location of privilege. The poem begins,

We are different  
like night and day  
like nightmare and sweet dream  
like drought and heavy rain  
like love and hate (18)

Further on he continues,

We are different  
like heaven and hell  
like difficult and simple  
like quarry and hunter  
like sky and earth (19)

The series of oppositional similes intensifies and expands the meaning of difference. At the same time the dichotomy is disrupted because where the writer and the reader are situated in this binary remains unclear. Repeated shifts between the poet speaking as “I” and directly addressing the reader as “You” further destabilise the continuum of meaning while placing both writer and reader’s personal experience within the wider political context of the poem -

I look for light in shadow
You, afraid of shadows, invade darkness with white
I have seen bloody revolutions and war
You cannot bear such witness (18)

Disrupting crude assumptions that divide the world into good and evil, the poet
identifies fear as the motivation for conquest of “darkness” - not with the light that
the poet seeks, but with “white”. Informed by the past, located in the ‘now’, the
poem resonates with visceral immediacy, “I know the pang of a hungry mind”, “I
feel the pain of others”, “I touch the infernal flame”, “I seek compassion in the
rubble”(18-19). In contrast the reader’s concerns seem inconsequential and
egocentric, “You revel in paradise pleasure”, “You lie down, take it easy”, “You are
in the pursuit of eternal happiness” and “Your head spins in clouds of desires” (19).

In a post-9/11 West, the Bush doctrine of “You’re either with us or against us” has
become so embedded in our cultural consciousness that we have come to believe it
fundamental to our very survival. The sociopolitical space is filled with words that
Foucault describes as the “incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse” (1972:229),
such as Opposition Leader Tony Abbott’s unremitting calls to “Stop the Boats”.
This kind of political discourse defines an Australian collective identity that is based
on what one isn’t, and whom one can hold back (Hage, 1998: 85). The poet
correctly points out that such difference marks the distinction between “life and
death” (19). Zand’s poem exposes the futility of a country or world divided by
difference, rather than united by similarities; this is powerfully driven home in the
final lines, “I’m a wandering zombie/You are a dancing fool” (19). By “tun[ing]
itself towards” such “a state of criticality”, this poem creates what Andrew Joron
calls “the uncanny reflection of an unfinished world” (2002: 10-11) - the reality is
that a society in which the familiar is made strange and uncanny, by “zombies” and
“fools”, is a society is crisis.

While it is clear that political poetry is essential for expressing the reality of cultural
displacement and social injustice experienced by mandatorily detained asylum
seekers in Australia, the question remains: Can these poets incite real change, or
will they prove to be, as Matthew Arnold once lamented, nothing but “a beautiful
ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain” (cited in Rees,
2007: 33)? Bhabha argues that the indeterminate spaces that lie in between personal
and political subject-positions can become the “locale of disruption and
displacement” of hegemonic cultural practices (1994: 77). It would therefore seem
that these poems of witness are ideally positioned to provoke the reader into a more
critical examination of contemporary Australian society and its history rather than a
passive acceptance of the preferred narrative. For Alexis Wright, the poetics of
“reminding and remembering” exist in the world’s loneliest places, the space
occupied by the “exiled, the persecuted, the tortured” (2008: 136). In Australia
some of these lonely places are the detention camps where asylum seekers are
mandatorily detained. The poems from and about these (non)spaces articulate the
undeniable barbarities and injustices occurring within them. Wright urges readers to take heed of these “quietly sung hidden hymns” because only by listening to poets’ “deep sense of consciousness” can they avoid persistently making the same mistakes (2008: 137). In these morally destitute times Australians need to learn how to share the country that they have inherited though violent and spurious means. In recognising that Australian national and individual identity is shaped by history, it becomes imperative to put aside the inherent, yet irrational, fear of the Other.

For these un-Australian poets there can be no separation of art and activism; for them, politics are corporeal and therefore suitable subject matter for poetic reflection. To read these poems is to share their experience of life. Articulating the terrors to which the poets have personally borne witness, it is undeniable that these poems defy exclusive definition, creating a rupture in reality, a space where truth can be redefined and the power of language deconstructed. Their potent words are evidence of the poetic imagination and the ability to document, in beauty, the crimes of injustice, bringing contemporary readers face to face with the terror occurring daily in their own country with more clarity than any media report or politician's speech. Armed with a powerful poetic voice these un-Australian poets challenge traditional narratives of Australian identity and nationhood. The exquisite horror of the alternative truths contained in their poems have resonance that inspire a motion towards change, change that can deconstruct the desire for conflict and advocate a rejection of the doctrine of difference. These poems challenge readers to engage in a wider reflection, not only of Australia’s chequered history and more recent global events that have shaped contemporary national identity, but also what their present actions should be - which will, in turn, forge the identity of future Australians.

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