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# **The Graffiti Artist: Doing the work of the lyric through juxtaposition of disparate social discourse**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for**

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of  
Creative Writing**

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## **Abstract**

One way the lyric has developed over the last century is to accommodate non-poetic social discourses, e.g. languages of prose, genre, profession and cultural groups into the lyric tradition. This thesis investigates the use of discourse to perform the work of lyric. It does so in two parts: in a critical essay and through my own creative work, a manuscript of original poetry that is meant to account for 60 percent of my thesis.

The critical component analyses four contemporary poems that do the work of the lyric through this accommodation of social discourse: “A History” by Glenn Colquhoun, “Mountains” by Sarah Jane Barnett, “Torch Song” by Laura Mullen and “Gesamtkunstwerk” by Lisa Samuels. It examines, in particular, these poets’ use of juxtaposition of disparate social discourse as an organising technique that illustrates the process of perception that is integral to lyric tradition. The intensity of the juxtaposition of social discourse increases with each of these poems, challenging some of the more traditional characteristics of what it means to be lyric, such as whether the lyric is “uttered by a single speaker” or “expresses subjective feeling”. But if these poems increasingly seem to fall outside the traditional lyric, this study argues that they in fact do the work of the lyric by treating the disparate discourse as both a representation and product of an increasingly globalised and fractured world. At the same time, the opportunities the poet provides to make links across the contrasting discourses allow the reader to construct an enunciative posture that provides a lens onto the “ache” of living in such a world, and thus recover the subjective experience associated with the lyric.

This critical study investigates questions that are also of interest in the creative portion: how to use multiple strands of social discourse in poetry in an effective and relevant way, and

how to organise a disparate set of poems into a collective whole. The essay, therefore, informed the creative component of this thesis, a collection of poetry entitled “The Graffiti Artist”. This collection offers juxtapositions of disparate discourses as well as narrative snapshots, each snapshot nevertheless intersecting with and connected to the life of the protagonist, a mother who turns during a time of crisis – personal crises with her children and social crisis in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes – to graffiti art. A narrative in fragments, the poems juxtapose strands of story and types of discourse she encounters in her different roles as graffiti artist, mother and wife. Such discourses include, for example, scientific discourse associated with her scientist son, the medical discourse of mental illness, the discourse of advertising, and the discourse of the earthquake-damaged city she inhabits. By using these techniques to extend defamiliarisation, I aimed to reveal a troubled world through the lens of a graffiti-artist speaker so a reader might see her experience from within, thus effecting a change in perception, and doing the work of the lyric.

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- *takahē* 87 (Aug 2016) for an earlier version of “from below the graffiti artist” (which was runner-up in 2015 *takahē* poetry competition), and current versions of “At the beginning of broke, a flyer offered a seed of hope” and “Sibling rivalry”.
- New Zealand Poetry Society for the impending publication of an earlier version of “The Canvas” and the current version of “Mother reads First Aid Manual” in their 2016 anthology *Penguin days*. “The Canvas” won the open section of their 2016 NZPS international poetry competition.
- *blackmail press* 41 *Piercing the White Space* (Nov 2015) for an earlier version of “Inspiration: spectrum rap at the Y”.
- *Poetry NZ Yearbook* 4 for the impending publication of “The Parameters”.
- *Flash Frontier: Slow* (April 2016) for an earlier version of “Expedition to the New World”.

- *Leaving the Red Zone: Poems from the Canterbury Earthquakes* (Clerestory Press: 2016) for an earlier version of “dendrites”.

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