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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**

**Master  
of  
Creative Writing**

**Massey University, Manawatu,  
New Zealand.**

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**2016**

## **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.

## Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my Massey University supervisor Dr Bryan Walpert for his insightful and inspiring feedback on both the critical and creative components, and for his unflinching patience and guidance throughout the process.

I would also like to acknowledge the editors of the following journals and anthologies who have published or accepted for impending publication earlier and current versions of some of the poems included in this collection:

- *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* (Clarestory Press: 2016) for an earlier version of “dendrites”.

I would also like to give thanks to the talented poets in my critique group, Karen Zelas, Helen Yong, Joanna Preston, Bella Boyd and Lynn Tara Austin, who have read, made suggestions and given enormous support through the evolution of many of the poems in this project.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family who were the inspiration behind the poems, and my two children in particular who I consulted on the language in the poems concerning teenage and scientific themes.

## Table of Contents

<b><u>THE GRAFFITI ARTIST: DOING THE WORK OF THE LYRIC THROUGH JUXTAPOSITION OF DISPARATE SOCIAL DISCOURSE</u></b>	<b>II</b>
ABSTRACT	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
INTRODUCTION	1
THE GROUND I WILL COVER	3
DOING THE WORK OF THE LYRIC	4
WHY JUXTAPOSITION OF DISPARATE SOCIAL DISCOURSE?	11
IN BETWEEN TWO PROSE VOICES, COLQUHOUN'S IMAGE OF ACHE	18
MULTIPLE SCENES AND DISCOURSES, BARNETT'S NATURAL WORLD	23
FRACTURED GENRE DISCOURSE, MULLEN'S REVISION	35
BROKEN SENTENCE, SAMUELS' LUCID SPHERE	49
THE GRAFFITI ARTIST	61
GRAINS OF SAND INSIDE A FRAME	64
<b><u>THE GRAFFITI ARTIST: A COLLECTION OF POEMS</u></b>	<b>72</b>
DEFINITION: MOTHER/ GRAFFITI ARTIST	73
FROM BELOW THE GRAFFITI ARTIST	74
IN THE CAR	75
PAINTING THE STONE FINGER	76
THE IDEA OF MAGNIFIED SAND	77
THE BEHOLDER IS IN THE EYE OF BEAUTY	78
NOW SHE IS A PARENT OF A SCIENCE MAJOR	79
SCHEDULE OF DAMAGED CONTENTS	80
AT THE BEGINNING OF BROKE, A FLYER OFFERS A SEED OF HOPE	81
THE CANVAS	82
THE VOICES OF A BROKEN CITY TROLL HER	83
INSPIRATION: SPECTRUM RAP AT THE Y	84
A SONG GETS STUCK IN HER HEAD AS SHE SPRAYS THE BACKGROUND BLUES ON THE WALL	86
WHEN THE MOTHER CONTEMPLATED HER ESCAPE	87
MR & MS	88
HEY CHE-CHE	89
THE ARTIST DOES PRACTICE SKETCHES AT THE KITCHEN TABLE	90
WHILE HER CHILDREN GROW UP	91
THE TROUBLE THE GRAFFITI ARTIST HAS	92
SIBLING RIVALRY	93
AT THE Y THERE WAS AN EXHIBITION	94
THE NAUTILUS SHELL	95
AN OBSESSION WITH ISOLATION	96
HUSBAND READS THE PRESS ON SATURDAY MORNING	97
A STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE	98
THE PARAMETERS	99



THE LECTURE	100
DREAM ON	101
ON THE WALL	102
BLACK HOLE POSSIBILITIES	103
AS SHE GRAFFITIS, SHE REMEMBERS THE DAY HER SON WAS ARRESTED	104
THE LINE OF GROWTH MAY NOT BE STRAIGHT	105
MOTHER READS FIRST AID MANUAL WHILE CROUCHING ON THE FLOOR BESIDE THE BOOKSHELF	106
EXPEDITION TO THE NEW WORLD	107
A DISSOCIATIVE EPISODE (PSYCHOLOGY)	108
'IN FLOW'	109
THE HOSPITAL BED HEARS AND SEES	110
'YOU CAN TELL A WOMAN BY THE WAY SHE SHOPS'	111
AN AFFIRMATION OF THE COMPUNCTION SHE'S RECENTLY HAD TO SNEAK OUT AT NIGHT...	112
A POLYCHROMATIC FASCINATION	113
OCCUPATION: MOTHER/GRAFFITI ARTIST	115
THE FINISHING TOUCHES	117
THE GRAFFITI ARTIST FEELS LIKE ONE OF THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY NINE THOUSAND PLANKTON...	118
HARMFUL CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE	119
DENDRITES	120
NOTES ON THE POEMS	121