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Middleton, Kate and Takolander, Maria 2012, I could have called it violence! : a conversation with Maria Takolander, Sydney City Poet.

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Text
January 18, 2012
2 Comments

“I could have called it Violence!”: A conversation with Maria Takolander

Though I have admired Maria Takolander’s poetry for a number of years now, I only got in touch with her a couple of months ago when I decided I’d like to write about her poem “Geography Lessons” in my Poems Revisited series. When this email exchange took place I was soon to travel to Melbourne, so I asked Maria if I might be able to interview her as well. Over a brisk weekend visiting my parents and friends, I took a day out to drive to Geelong’s Deakin University campus and meet with Takolander.

Before we sat down to conduct this interview we talked for a couple of hours, sharing lunch and a coffee. At a similar stage of her poetic career to myself, it was wonderful to find that we instantly connected over our experiences as poets beginning to establish ourselves, but also as writers of other forms.

Reviewing Ghostly Subjects, Martin Duwell suggested that while Australia lacks a minimalist...
tradition, a large portion of your writing could be labelled “minimalist”: is this how you think of your own work? At the same time you’ve written a critical book about Magical Realism, a genre not often associated with minimalism. To begin—what was your experience of writing on this subject of Magical Realism?

I feel that Magical Realism had degenerated into something of a cliché by the time I finished writing my book about it; people were churning out magical realist novels because it was popular, and because it sold well. My resistance to that mode in my own work comes from the clichéd nature of what Magical Realism has become, both actually and in the popular imagination.

I see the roots of Magical Realism in the work of Borges, and how what he does both as a poet, and as a short fiction writer whose fictions almost read like non-fiction: that this is a minimalist version or precursor of magical realism. I can see Borges as a figure that floats behind your work in some ways.

Yes! These days Magical Realism is seen as a maximalist genre, whereas Borges writes with such discipline. If discipline is akin to minimalism, then I might be amenable to that “charge.” I don’t know that I write in a minimalist style—I think, if anything, I write in a hysterical voice! Sometimes I think I’m being funny, but I’m not sure if I achieve that. The sense of minimalism, though, probably comes through discipline… I do like to discipline my verse! Perhaps too much…

When I read your poetry I can see where Duwell is coming from: I can see that idea of minimalism existing in your work, but the poetry is also very embodied in a way that I don’t necessarily think of minimalism. This embodiment is in tension with a certain distance. How do you approach the poem as you’re writing it?

I think that distance also comes from discipline. As for the embodiment, that’s interesting. In a very literal sense I’m very interested in the material, the physical body, even in the abject, as a space which poetry should be allowed to explore. In some ways I think of Ghostly Subjects as a kind of “up yours” to a traditional understanding of poetry as being lyrical and elevated and spiritual. I think poetry should also be grubby. Which isn’t to say that poetry should be bad or messy, but I think you can have a poetry that’s both about embodiment—the physical and the abject—but that’s still very tight and polished.

I also get a sense in some of your work that you have a playful attitude toward the body—at times, almost grotesquely playful.

I think that might be related to being Finnish! I am very comfortable with the body, while I know that the body makes a lot of people uncomfortable. You don’t see the female body, in particular, enough in poetry in real terms. The feminine is often there as something aesthetically fine or rewarding, but I want the female to be there in a real way too.

Along those same lines, your teaching schedule lists work on literature and science; Ghostly Subjects is divided into four sections, “Geography,” “Chemistry,” “Biology” and “Cultural.” Though the poems in the book aren’t overtly “scientific,” do you think this interest manifests in your writing?

The interest in science is quite recent, and I think it actually post-dates Ghostly Subjects, despite those misleading titles of “Chemistry” and “Biology”! But having said that, I do have this abiding interest in the body—an obsession—and particularly the female body, which I like to explore in relation to misogynistic conceptions of the female body. And I think the “Biology” section of the book addresses that obsession. I think this is informed by being pissed off as a woman by how women are portrayed culturally!

The science material I see as more prominent in the work that will appear in a second collection.
In what ways do you think that scientific interest is coming out in your recent work?

I’ve been doing a lot of reading in consciousness studies, cognitive science and socio-biology. I think my understanding of how the brain works is different from what it used to be. I’ve been reading people like Daniel Dennett, Francisco Varela, Ellen Dissanayake and Susan Oyama. The reading actually originated in my fascination with the creative process, in what actually happens when I write a poem—this motivated my reading in the first place, and then in turn the reading is having an effect on my creative process and on the content of my writing.

I’ve thought of writing a piece—I’m not sure if it will be an essay or maybe a poem—called “The Unconscious Does Not Exist.” I think that’s nice and provocative, and it’ll signal a re-conception of the relationship of consciousness to unconsciousness that’s already out there, although it’ll be applied particularly to the creative process. Creative practitioners aren’t always aware of the research in these areas that is out there. For instance, I always tended to think of consciousness and unconsciousness in Freudian terms before I discovered these exciting new ways of thinking about those things. And I find them more convincing! Freud is a bit of fraud in some senses, I think—I’ve got a new poem in *ABR* in which I say as much. I have a bit of fun essentially bagging him out!

When you use your reading of scientific research for a poem, how do you make that initial connection?

I think that the poem is often already there. I’ve got a new poem in the *Australian Poetry Journal* called “The Interpretation of Dreams” which is an example of how my writing is being informed by my reading. It’s deliberately revisionary in taking on Freud, but it’s also given a personal context: it’s about my dreams, and how I think of them now. Rather than seeing them as some talismanic representation of the unconscious, I see dreams in relation to a brain in a body that’s shut down its vision and its hearing. What’s the brain got to work with in a sleeping body? It’s working with past memories and imaginings. That poem is an example of how I think my “academic” research is informing my poetry.

How does your academic career intersect with your poetic life?

I think there’s a significant overlap now between poets and academics. As a poet I thrive on ideas and language, and as an academic you’re constantly trading in ideas and language! I don’t think, from that starting point, that there’s any contradiction in being both an academic and a poet—in fact, they are highly compatible forms of being.

Teaching literature and teaching poetry I’m constantly immersed in the creative use of language—what a great environment to be in as a poet! Added to that, I’m constantly immersed in ideas, whether they’re in literary theory or cultural studies or the sciences… it’s all very enriching.

*Ghostly Subjects* is your first book. I have a couple of questions related to that: can you describe the process of putting together your first book?

I started writing poetry that was of a publishable nature after I turned 30—there were years there of writing bad poems, with a few publishable poems, until I eventually ended up writing more publishable poems and less bad ones! Then John Kinsella, who had been reading my work, asked me if I had a manuscript. So I put one together!

Did that first version of *Ghostly Subjects* change much?

Not significantly, no. It was too long, so I pulled a whole section—but otherwise it wasn’t substantially different.

And I know that you said the sub-sections came later, with their titles, but could you tell me
about the architecture of imposing these four sections?

It’s a bit artificial. I had a diverse range of poems, and I wondered, “How is this going to hang together as a book?” It was a valuable exercise, trying to recognise my obsessions and to categorize them like that. But that categorisation definitely came after the fact, in a way it hasn’t with the next project that I am working on. There the writing has been guided by the idea of history, and exploring it.

But with Ghostly Subjects—well, I had no idea when I started writing poems that anyone would want to publish a book!

What do you think you’ve learnt coming out of that first collection in putting together a second book of verse?

I have less failed poems now than I used to—I’ve learnt how to write a poem that might succeed. And I don’t want to repeat myself: I want to stay interested in what I’m doing, and to stay interested I have to feel like I’m going somewhere new, and in going somewhere new that I’m getting better.

Did you learn anything about how to sequence a book that will result in a different approach to your next book?

Well, I do have a thematic unity already, by writing about the concept of history for this next collection, so I don’t think I will have sections in the next collection.

Still, it was such a good exercise for me, arranging Ghostly Subjects, just because I had no idea I was so obsessed with the body! In fact, I probably could have just called the collection Misogyny! But then, there’s the exception of the landscape poems. I could have called it Violence, I suppose, because violence is another obsession throughout my work!

You are also, I believe, working on a book of short stories: is this due before your next collection of poems?

I don’t have a deadline on the next poetry collection—though I aim to have something to show for this year by January of next year. My short story manuscript is due August 2012. I’m trying to work on both side by side—and that’s had an effect, because I’ve found myself writing prose poems.

I think, in a way, that my short stories in general are extended prose poems, in a way. I’m not quite as interested in character as perhaps most short story writers. I’m really just learning—I don’t know what I’m doing! It’s all experimentation.

There are plenty of short story writers who don’t take character as their primary focus: writers who will start from different obsessions and formal interests. Borges, who we talked about earlier, strikes me as an excellent example of a writer challenging our notion of what should drive a short story…

Yes! I suppose I just hear those writers who say things like, “I fall in love with my characters!” and “They take on a life of their own…” and I can’t imagine that! The ideas and my love of language drive my writing, not character or plot.

As well as poems and short stories, you have also published some nonfiction. When you go to write, do you always know what form your ideas will fit into?

Yes, pretty much. It’s based on something as simple as how long I can keep a piece going! If an idea needs to be expanded on, needs to include examples, it’s going to be a longer piece. But if it’s just an experience of a state of being—and I guess an experience of an affective state or emotional state is...
what I’m primarily interested in—that’s probably not going to be a short story. That’s going to be a poem.

**In many poems, your Finnish ancestry enters the poem in passing: is this important as a cultural identity?**

I think it’s important to note that I spoke Finnish first—I didn’t speak English until I was five. Now, this is purely speculative, but I think that learning English second—or any language second—encourages a kind of distance from that language. Or inevitably brings a kind of distance from that language so that you can be more playful with that second language, rather than compliant. I’m not sure—as I said, this is purely speculative, but I think that for me that’s how it work.

In terms of my autobiography—I think that migrants are always interested in origins. You have a somewhat disembodied existence as a migrant, and so you are interested in finding some kind of foundation. It’s natural to look to your family origins for that.

Finland has become for me, as a first-generation Australian, a kind of mythic place. I think that’s probably true of migrants in general—that their homeland becomes invested with some kind of mythic importance.

As the child of migrants, you’re given a sense of loss. Your parents are always talking about the “homeland,” and you grow up thinking you’ve lost something, that something’s been taken away from you—that you belong there, and you don’t belong here. But then when you go back there, you don’t belong there either! So that state of in-betweenness exists—but it’s a generative experience too.

**You published your first book with Salt, a publisher with international distribution: do you think about the ways in which Australian poetry might cross borders?**

I don’t think about it too much, though I’m aware that Australian work isn’t necessarily well known abroad. There are a few writers with an international reputation, and that’s it. But then, writing poetry for me isn’t about trying to seek international fame and glory! I’d be disappointed if it was!

**Do you think there is such a thing as an Australian poetry?**

Just what there is!

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*Poets invariably speak to other poets, living and dead, through their work. In collaborating on these interviews, I have asked the authors I interview to provide two short texts: one, on a volume of Australian poetry that has meant a lot to their practice, and the second on a non-Australian volume of poetry.*

**On Maria’s Bookshelf:**

**Vanishing Point** by Felicity Plunkett

Felicity Plunkett’s *Vanishing Point* was such an important book for me. Its release coincided with the birth of my son, and during the many wakeful nights following that event I returned obsessively to Plunkett’s beautiful and unsentimental meditations on her own experiences of childbirth. ‘Aubade’ finishes: ‘what dark skies we saw, my ceiling-smashing girl’. ‘Delivery’ ends: ‘My body broke open like a laugh.’ The book’s intelligence and risks and scope in terms of its subject matter—there’s
history, science and the personal—represented for me a new post-Plathian vision of what an unapologetic woman’s poetry might look like.

Poems of the Night by Jorge Luis Borges

I continue to be thrilled by the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges—romantic and intellectual, prosaic and lyrical—and I have recently been enjoying a new anthology of his poems, Poems of the Night, which presents English translations of some poems en face with their Spanish originals. I have loved the experience of returning to the beautiful labyrinth of Borges’ obsessions, this realm of pure literature, where even our most sordid experiences are transformed into something perfect and meaningful. Some favourite lines: ‘The darkness is as gentle as someplace far away’; ‘There is not a single second that is not gnawing away at all our previous orderings’; ‘Light roams the streets inventing dirty colours’; ‘The memory of an old infamy returns to my heart. / Like a dead horse flung up on the beach by the tide.’

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Terriann White

Very interesting. Thanks. I was particularly nostalgic to read those three names: Susan oyama, Dan Dennett, and Ellen Dissanayake, all of whom I hosted in Perth and got to know quite well. All of them such great thinkers, and so attuned to the centrality of poetry. Thanks?

Kate Middleton

Thanks for reading Terriann - One of the best reasons for me to conduct these interviews is that I get to learn so much. I don't know the work of Oyama, Dennett and Dissanayake at all - but I'm excited, after talking with Maria, to learn more. Especially now that I've heard another commendation for their thought!
Notes on poetry and Sydney by Kate Middleton.

In my role as Sydney City Poet I wish to draw attention to Australian poems, profile Australian poets, review the work of Australian and international authors and discuss my own experience of poetry and life in Sydney.

Please follow my thought process this year in the Diary of a City Poet, or find time for short essays on Australian poems I love in the Poems Revisited. Read profiles of Australia Poets, quotes on poetry and art, and reviews of new books from Australia and from around the world.

My role as the Sydney City Poet is funded by Arts NSW and hosted by UTS.

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