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The essay as polemical performance: ‘salted genitalia’ and the ‘gender card’

Abstract:

On October 9, 2012, the then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard rose to her feet in Canberra’s Parliament House, and, in response to a motion tabled by Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, delivered her blistering Misogyny Speech. Although Gillard’s speech was met with cynicism by the Australian Press Gallery, some accusing her of playing the ‘gender card’, it reverberated around the world and when the international coverage poured back into the country, many Australians stood up and listened.

One of them was author, essayist, classical concert pianist and mother, Anna Goldsworthy.

Shortly after the delivery of The Misogyny Speech, *Quarterly Essay* editor Chris Feik approached Goldsworthy to write the 50th essay for the Black Inc. publication with his idea to view this event through a cultural lens. It took several months to research and compose the characteristically long-form (25,000 word) essay that *Quarterly Essay* publishes every three months as a single volume; ‘Unfinished Business: Sex, Freedom and Misogyny’ was launched at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne on July 1, 2013, five days after Julia Gillard was deposed from her prime ministership by Kevin Rudd.

This paper takes a look back at the 50th issue of the *Quarterly Essay*, to discuss with its author her essay-writing process and the aftermath of publication. Goldsworthy is erudite as she looks at the construction of the essay, its contents, and her love of essay writing. Although she confesses to not having a definition for the form, she believes it does not matter; that its fluidity is a basic constituent element. Her love of language and music inform both the breadth of her essay, as well as its narrative – there is lyricism to her sentences and a musicality to her structure.

This paper also contextualises ‘Unfinished Business’ as an example of the crucial long-form essay contribution that Black Inc.’s *Quarterly Essay* performs in the Australian literary/political/cultural/intellectual environment. There were critics of Goldsworthy’s essay, and these are assessed as a component of how ‘the essay’ potentially can function in a liberal First-World society, as demonstrated by the *Quarterly Essay* periodical.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom – Phillip Lopate in *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1995: xxiii)

Introduction

The essay, characterised by its intimate tone, seemingly collaborative dialoguing, and its intention to posit and circulate ideas, has been a powerful mode of expression for centuries. Phillip Lopate writes that a ‘conversational dynamic – the desire for contact – is ingrained in the form, and serves to establish a quick emotional intimacy with the audience’ (1995: xxv). He claims this conversational intimacy creates a collaborative pact with the reader: ‘In effect, a contract between writer and reader has been drawn up: the essayist must then make good on it by delivering, or discovering, as much honesty as possible ... the struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the personal essay’ (Ibid.). Today, most studying, practicing or simply reading in this field lays the modern prototype firmly at the feet of the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). His works, simply entitled *Essais* (*The Essays*), were written approximately between 1570 and 1592, with publication beginning in 1577. *The Essays* consist of three books with a total of 107 chapters. In many ways Montaigne embodies for the modern essayist the true ethos of the form; he writes through the lens of himself, with many frailties exposed:

I make no doubt but that I often happen to speak of things that are much better and more truly handled by those who are masters of the trade. You have here purely an essay of my natural parts, and not of those acquired: and whoever shall catch me tripping in ignorance, will not in any sort get the better of me; for I should be very unwilling to become responsible to another for my writings, who am not so to myself, nor satisfied with them. Whoever goes in quest of knowledge, let him fish for it where it is to be found; there is nothing I so little profess. These are fancies of my own, by which I do not pretend to discover things but to lay open myself ... (‘Of Books’ 2006)

His argument underpins the tenor of the essay still – writing to discover; attempting to find out through a rational dialectic between the author and the reader, who may just know a little more about certain subjects than the author. It is this lilting lyricism between wonder and knowledge; between individual musing and fact; between opinion and proof that has seen a resurgence in the essay form as a staple of both the mainstream and counter-mainstream, and on both legacy- and technology-based platforms. Indeed, the internet has much to do with the broader swathe of essays at our fingertips – today, anyone and everyone with an urge to say something can publish online; here, the test of quality cannot be quantified by metrics. The test of quality can only be quantified by durability and longevity in the hands of a fair minded readership. Willa McDonald calls the essay ‘curiously democratic’. She writes: ‘Anyone can use it to express themselves – and on issues that matter – without claiming expertise in any field’ (2007: 125). Here she is echoing Phillip Lopate when he writes of the essay’s ‘implicitly democratic bent’. He is discussing Montaigne, tagging him the ‘patron saint of personal essays’. Lopate writes: ‘At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience ... When he [Montaigne] was telling about himself, he was

talking, to some degree, about all of us' (1995: xxiii). As Inga Clendinnen, in her ever-eloquent and polemical style, writes:

The odd thing is that I know what essays are not. I know you can't preach in an essay because it turns into a sermon; you can't teach in an essay because it turns into a lecture; you can't exhort in an essay because it turns into a harangue, and you can't dredge the mud at the bottom of your soul because then it will turn into a confession. In the dry-mouthed panic of a radio interview I once said that essays were like love affairs, meaning they were intimate, brought unexpected pleasure and usually didn't last very long. Now I realise they are nothing like as intense as a love affair, and that that is their quality. (2006: 3)

This she writes in an introduction to *Agamemnon's Kiss: Selected Essays* (2006). The introduction to this text is her grappling for a definition – of what an essay is – from Montaigne to Flaubert to Woolf and then back again to Montaigne, until finally she writes: 'So now, rather too late, I think I know what an essay is: a direct, equal, personal communication on a matter of shared interest between writer and reader' (Ibid.: 7). This time she is simple and succinct, clearly inspired by Virginia Woolf who, in her meta-essay on 'The Modern Essay' more than 80 years earlier, writes:

The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation ... The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world ... vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out. (Woolf 1925 [2003])

So, definitions begin to merge a little, more in their roominess to ponder than in their conclusions. What we do know is that the essay is generally identified and executed as one of two styles: the formal and the informal, also tagged as the impersonal and personal. In this paper, my intention is to interrogate the melding of the formal with the informal essay, and the enablement of this melding and positioning within the Australian literary/political/cultural/intellectual environment through the publication of the *Quarterly Essay*. Looking at 'Unfinished Business: Sex, Freedom and Misogyny', in the 50th issue of *Quarterly Essay*, written by Anna Goldsworthy, through narrative/discursive inquiry I will demonstrate her process of compiling and writing the essay. Additionally, this paper will discuss the means by which Goldsworthy's essay performed and was tested amongst its readership, positing this as the literary evolution of a potentially democratic discourse in a liberal First-World society – an exemplar of the Montaignian spirit of essaying. But first, some background on the publishing house and the publisher who produces *Quarterly Essay*: Black Inc. and Morry Schwartz.

Long Form, *Quarterly Essay* and Morry Schwartz

The Modern English derivation of the word *essay* is found in the influence of the French language on Middle English: *essayer*, meaning to try or to attempt. This French

infinitive in its turn is a derivative of the Latin verb *exigo*, meaning to examine or consider. Morry Schwartz's *Quarterly Essay* is closer in meaning to the Latin – it examines and considers issues within the Australian public sphere, four times a year. *The Quarterly Essay* has been examining and considering the Australian literary/political/cultural/intellectual environment since 2001. It is described on its website as:

... an agenda-setting Australian journal of politics and culture. Each issue contains a single essay written at a length of about 25,000 words, followed by correspondence on previous essays ... *Quarterly Essay* aims to present the widest range of political, intellectual and cultural opinion and to foster debate. It offers a forum for original long-form investigations, profiles and arguments. (Black Inc. <https://www.quarterlyessay.com/about>)

Schwartz's publishing house, Black Inc., also publishes *The Monthly* and, for the past 18 years, *The Best Australian Essays*.¹ In 2014, completely against the tide of publishing, it launched *The Saturday Paper*. At the time, Schwartz told journalist Kate Legge that *The Saturday Paper* was aimed at the 'intelligent reader who doesn't care about car accidents or petty crime' (2014). Schwartz's interest is clearly long-form, quality writing, and he insists that *Quarterly Essay* and *The Monthly* – both legacy and web-based publications – are making money despite the current speed-first, consider-later market.

Quarterly Essay sells in the vicinity of 20,000 copies when penned by a well-known author. It attracts some of Australia's very best: Robert Manne, John Birmingham, Mungo MacCallum, John Button, Tim Flannery, Gideon Haigh, Germaine Greer, David Malouf, David Marr, Margaret Simons, Raimond Gaita, Mark Latham, and Noel Pearson to name a few; some authors have written several essays. *Quarterly Essay* comes in the shape of a soft cover book, with single column design, Matthew Ricketson likening it to 'a hardcopy version of an Amazon Kindle' (2016: 73). It sells for \$12.95 at newsagents and book shops. Chris Feik is the current editor,² and each new issue includes reader letters commenting upon or critiquing the previous *Quarterly Essay* as well as the author's response to this correspondence. Each copy also carries, in very small print under its front page banner, the author and topic of the next essay – under the heading of the 50th issue, the 51st issue was stated, simply, as: *David Marr on George Pell*. It is clever marketing, subtle and effective. *Quarterly Essay* authors are paid well: \$15,000 for somewhere between 20-30,000 words, a word-length which, at the time of launch, was unique. In 2001, Henry Rosenbloom – a publisher at, and founder of, Scribe Publications – told Melbourne *Age* journalist Jason Steger: 'He [Shwartz] pays a ridiculous amount – \$15,000 for 20,000 words – which is wonderful for his authors, who are high-quality authors, and he publishes it with a very low retail price' (2004). Steger writes: 'Rosenbloom credits *Quarterly Essay* with stimulating the demand for longer non-fiction writing in a number of formats' (Ibid.). At this word length, *Quarterly Essay* has persisted and grown, at the vanguard of a global flourishing interest in long-form non-fiction. As Williams writes, the cultural and political impact of the periodical, at the time of the 50th issue and 12 years after its launch, is remarkable, considering:

Surely nobody ever truly believed in the *Quarterly Essay* as an organ of impartiality, but that was beyond the point: an independent Australian publisher was taking a chance on the discussion and dissemination of ideas ... The 50 back-issues read like a roll call of the past decade plus of Australian political discourse and cultural preoccupations. (2013)

The first issue, by Robert Manne, was *In Denial – The Stolen Generations and the Right* (2001). It set the tone:

There's a certain poetry to that first issue being about denial and silence ... By aiming its attentions right down the barrel of the culture wars and calling out a failure in our dominant cultural narrative, publisher Morry Schwartz and founding editor Peter Craven announced the *Quarterly Essay's* arrival with a pugnacious confidence. This was neither News Ltd nor Fairfax; this was not a publication beholden to a university or think-tank: this was political and cultural commentary with literary knobs on. (Williams 2013)

This type of publication – an at-length, stand-alone, long-form narrative essay – is unique to Australia. Feik says, to the best of his knowledge, *Quarterly Essay* is indeed unique (pers. comm. 7-8 November 2016). It is where our essayists and deep thinkers muse out loud and in public; where we – the public – can listen and hear these minds at work, dealing with the big questions for us to ingest and, perhaps, resolve ourselves. It is a space where the Fourth Estate is seen to perform its democratic remit – information dissemination, slickly packaged and on sale in the local newsagent for anyone to purchase, with online copies for sale as well. With this in mind, Williams writes of Anna Goldsworthy's essay, together with Morry Schwartz's contribution to the country's intellectual landscape, that:

A new *Quarterly Essay* is an event. A 50th *Quarterly Essay* is an occasion, and a significant one at that. It is ... erudite, thought-provoking and provocative. It's also a cracker of a read. Fifty issues in, Morry Schwartz's vision has become an institution and a tradition. (2013)

'Salted Genitalia' and that 'Gender Card'

It is befitting that the 50th issue of this 'institution and [a] tradition' should be highly polemical, reflecting the turbulence of a notable period in Australian Federal Government. There was instability and discontent – it was 2012 and we could see it on our televisions each night; hear it on our radios each day; and surf it on the internet 24/7. The prime minister was Julia Gillard, who had controversially deposed the incumbent Kevin Rudd, and Anna Goldsworthy begins her essay with one of the most explosive moments in the Australian parliament during Gillard's time in office – the 'salted genitalia' episode (Goldsworthy 2013: 2). A leaked text from Peter Slipper, Speaker of the House, to one of his male staffers included the phrases: 'Look at a bottle of mussel meat! Salty cunts in brine' (Ibid.: 1). The Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, objected to the text on the basis of its 'vile, anatomically specific language' (Ibid.) and called for the Speaker to be sacked. In reply, and seemingly called upon to defend the indefensible – how does a prime minister, let alone a female prime minister,

stand up to defend Peter Slipper and ‘those’ texts? – Gillard was at her rhetorical best. Having publicly ignored sexist gibes from the opposition, the media, the public and online since the beginning of her tenure, Julia Gillard set out to subvert Abbott’s call for the sacking of the Speaker by delivering her now renowned Misogyny Speech.³ Goldsworthy argues two speeches by Julia Gillard were heard: the one the Press Gallery in Canberra witnessed and pulled apart, accusing Gillard of playing the ‘gender card’ amongst other things; and the speech heard globally, as it went viral on the internet. Goldsworthy writes of the performativity of the speech as it whipped around the world:

Broadcast on YouTube, it transcended its contents – the salted genitalia, the market tests, its own cunning – and became a more intimate piece of theatre ... up close, you register the woman’s rage, the tremor in her voice. Around her, the barracking and heckling provide a Greek chorus of amplification ... Abbott sits in silence, but as his half-smile gives way to grim forbearance, it is clear that he registers the speech’s significance better than the press gallery. (2013: 2)

No one was expecting this speech and Goldsworthy quite rightly concretes its place into the archives of *Quarterly Essay*. She calmly and intuitively paints a picture of the state of play in Australian politics, as a polemical observer. More the philosopher than the participant, the astute spectator than stake holder, hers is more the beginning of a well-thought-out discussion than a diatribe on gender inequality in this country in the wake of Gillard’s tenure. And this is the beauty of this long-form piece of writing: Goldsworthy celebrates Gillard’s Misogyny Speech as a break away from the safe and anodyne endurance of endemic sexism rampant throughout Australia. Gillard finally speaks up; she says out loud what is on her mind after at least two years of sexist attacks she had, until that moment, endured stoically and silently. As a young Australian woman, professional, and mother, Goldsworthy is at the vanguard of a new gender-fuelled vocalisation of, not just feminist thought, but, surely, of fair and just expectation (Joseph 2015: 261). The long-form essay allows its author to write authoritatively through research and deep analysis, creating an informed and assertive, yet personalised and individual platform. There is no doubt essay writing is underpinned by subjectivity but, as such, that subjectivity is perhaps one of its greatest assets. Goldsworthy says of the Misogyny Speech:

Look I admired it. I liked the fact that I felt we actually saw a truer Gillard in that Misogyny Speech than perhaps we’d seen elsewhere regardless of how scripted it was. I did feel it was animated by genuine feeling. So, on the one hand, yes I was impressed by that performance. On the other hand as well, perhaps one of the things that struck me was the reception that it got, which to me spoke to the fact that there are a whole lot of women feeling pretty angry and they’re not saying anything about it ... the prime minister does and there’s all this ‘go girl, hurray, yay. I’d better show this to my daughter’. All of which suggest to me that relations between the sexes are perhaps not as healthy as we might like to believe. (Author interview 2016)

Chris Feik had approached Goldsworthy to write her *Quarterly Essay*, perhaps surprisingly, because of an American television comedy-drama called *Girls*, set in New York and starring Lena Dunham. Goldsworthy explains:

Chris Feik, my editor at Black Inc., had read the review I wrote of Lena Dunham's *Girls* (*The Monthly*, September 2012) and he thought there were some interesting points being made about the representations of femaleness, I guess, in popular culture, and he said he thought I'd probably have more to say about it. (pers. comm. 9 March 2016)

A year later, in the March 2013 issue of *The Monthly*, Goldsworthy is by-lined for a piece entitled 'Julia Gillard and the Women in Cabinet'. It was the cover story for *The Monthly – The XX Factor: Anna Goldsworthy meets the Ministry of Sisters*. The essay was quickly commissioned – Goldsworthy was a replacement for Virginia Trioli – and she was given just 24 hours to prepare and get to Canberra for the interview. Coming just months before her deadline for *Quarterly Essay*, this commission was a bonus, giving Goldsworthy extra access to Gillard. On reflection, Goldsworthy says: 'It was good timing. It was a good interview for me to do because it actually gave me some further material, and I had been thinking about Julia Gillard anyway in the context of this essay' (pers. comm. 9 March 2016).

Goldsworthy writes regularly for *The Monthly*, mainly on popular culture (she is classically trained as a concert pianist, and an accomplished memoirist, penning *Piano Lessons* (2011) and *Welcome to Your New Life* (2013), both published by Black Inc.). Of managing and writing the unique format of *Quarterly Essay*, however, she says:

25,000 words – not so daunting because I'd already written two memoirs which were each, I guess, considerably more than that, but daunting in the sense of trying to structure one's thoughts over that sort of length. I think I've kind of developed a good concept of what, say, two-and-a-half thousand words is, or 2,000 words for a review, or even 4,000 for an extended essay, and so the way I decided to get my head around 25,000 was by breaking it down into portions which I can more readily digest and which I think the reader can more readily digest. I can't remember what size they were. Two-and-a-half thousand or maybe 5,000.

So I was sort of thinking of it in terms of those building blocks rather than just sitting down and thinking now I've got to produce 25,000 words ... the commission came at a time that was extremely chaotic for me because after I'd said I'd do it I accepted a job in Adelaide and the whole family relocated. So that cut into my writing time considerably, and I had a whole lot of touring – piano performances and various other things on the go. So I found that by breaking it down into those bite sized chunks I was better able to sort of systematically approach it, producing a certain word count per week, which is not usually the way I write. But in this case with a looming deadline, there was sort of no other way to do it.

I mean, it's a nice length in a way because it gives you a broad enough canvas to examine some areas in depth, but it's not so huge that you're thinking it's too diffuse, I think, as to the degree of focus. It's something almost like a monograph I guess, 25,000 about something or other. (pers. comm. 9 March 2016)

There is something else about *Quarterly Essay* – an uncanny knack of publishing on the crest of political drama – almost before or as, it happens. Goldsworthy's *Quarterly Essay* was launched at Melbourne's Wheeler Centre five days after Julia Gillard was deposed as Australia's first female prime minister. Goldsworthy says:

Hats off to Morry Schwartz and the visionary team at Black Inc. for pioneering this because a lot of these essays have been real ... conversation starters I think, and they always seem to be commissioned with an acute sense of timing. I mean, I can think of many cases in which this has happened, including my own, which I think was released the week that Julia Gillard was forced out of the prime ministership ... I suppose one hopes to write something that, even if it is timely, it also transcends the immediate events of that time and can be read next year or the year after, and [in] 10 years' or 20 years' time, and still have something to offer. So I suppose it's about managing that balance between more general observations and specific responses to what's going on in the now. (Ibid.)

Goldsworthy says she loves the essay space but struggles to define it (in good company with Clendinnen and Woolf). She says:

Oh I love essays. I love personal essays, and I'm really grateful that in Australia there's enough people who care about them to preserve them in various places. I mean I suppose essays are only as good or bad as their writers. I just don't think you can go past a good essay.

I guess it's a pretty broad term isn't it? I mean, on the one hand you've got the personal essay, and on the other hand I guess you've got the academic essay, and I think they're actually quite different kettles of fish and perhaps the only thing they have in common is that they're an extended piece of nonfiction writing. I don't know that I have a really satisfactory working definition of an essay. I think I probably construct an essay to suit the commission or the nature of the commission. I suppose in the essays I love there's a sense of eavesdropping on someone's thinking, and you know, at one point, that it's original thinking and thinking that reveals connections or things that haven't occurred to the reader before. (Ibid.)

Goldsworthy's life was hectic at the time of the *Quarterly Essay* commission, becoming more so as the months progressed. She says:

It was actually a little bit hairy even when I first accepted the commission. I was a bit concerned about how I was going to meet the deadline just because I knew I had a lot of concerts and so on – but then there was the job and the move and the little boys, and then when I got this new job and then when we started to move I just thought, 'How on earth am I going to get this done?', because I really had to get it done in just a matter of a couple of months I think it was in the end. So that aspect was harrowing and I did work very hard to get it done in the available time and I did get a bit worn out. More worn out than I usually get writing something because of that, and it was actually due to the fact that my life was very crowded at that time. (Ibid.)

But she kept writing, sending chunks off to Feik as she finished them:

He liked what I was working on. I just took it to him a bit at a time which is the way I also delivered the memoirs. And he didn't really give me a huge amount of feedback except to say, 'Please continue' ... and then in the editorial process there were a couple of personal episodes that he took out. There were one or two inclusions that we wrestled over a little bit ... Chris was very supportive and very happy with it. (Ibid.)

Goldsworthy's biggest challenge was the shape of the essay. She says:

What I struggled with was being entirely linear and logical in the unfolding of an argument because I think that's not exactly how I think. I think by association and perhaps a little bit laterally, and wrestling that into some sort of form that satisfies the readers' expectation that there should be a thesis was a challenge to me in both pieces, and ... I [used] certain light motifs and deconstructed words, and came back to them, and I just found that was the way that I generated that essay rather than, 'I'm going to say this, then I'm going to say this, I'm going to say this and I'm going to have a conclusion.' It was more an exploration. (Ibid.)

Goldsworthy's partner and the father of her two young sons, photographer Nicholas Purcell, is always her first reader. She says:

Yes absolutely ... he was very positive too. Everybody I showed it to in my inner circle was positive. My mum particularly liked certain sections that she thought were on song. My dad,⁴ with whom my politics don't always exactly align, nonetheless said he also appreciated it and enjoyed it and thought it was absolutely rational and reasonable. So my inner circle was all very supportive. (Ibid.)

Goldsworthy writes like I imagine she hears her own music in her head: there is a lyricism to her words. And, in this, she underpins what Singer and Walker write about the essay form: the essay is 'like a musical theme and variations, circles and probes, varies its rhythm, modulates from major to minor key' (2013: 5). Indeed, Goldsworthy stages the text like a musical sequence, cleverly reincarnating notions or motifs already considered, to strengthen her meaning. In this way she elaborates and builds her argument in steps, dissecting the meanings of words like 'feminism', 'shame', 'witch', 'bitch', and delineating 'misogyny' from 'sexism'. Goldsworthy asks: 'If misogyny is simply dressed-up sexism, what word do we reach for when we encounter the genuine misogynist: the man (or woman) who loathes us for having a vagina?' (2013a: 5). She argues that in our society, 'playing the gender card' has a silencing effect, not an empowering one, 'through which female grievance can be reduced to phatic noise' (Ibid.: 15).

The *Quarterly Essay* as Polemical Performance in Australia

The format of the *Quarterly Essay* is simple – one 20-30,000 word essay on a contemporary issue or public figure, written by some of the best writers in the land, published every three months. The cover of each issue carries the next issue's topic and author as well as letters from readers, at length, in a section called 'Correspondence'. This is where the audience/readership gets its chance to criticise, praise, agree, or disagree with the essay published in the issue preceding, creating a quasi-conversational dialogue, albeit a conversation spanning three months from one issue to the next. Basically, these are the correspondents' own shorter essay forays, responding to Goldsworthy succinctly and with similar assertiveness. The final section is 'Response to Correspondence', where the *Quarterly Essay* author in question replies to the correspondence. These latter two sections of the periodical are incisive, to the point, and fair; they seem akin to the modern, rendered Public Sphere articulated by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1991) in that they are potentially representational and democratic in shape, conversational, and dialogic. I write

‘potentially’ because many of the respondents are well known themselves, or have a sturdy public profile; some may be asked to respond. But there is always opportunity for the ordinary Australian to voice their views. Feik explains:

We send out copies of the essay and invite people to respond. Some do. But we also accept unsolicited responses, including from people without any public profile. Usually we have enough to be selective in what we choose to publish. We look for the well-written, the interesting, the original. We want a range of positions, including critical ones. And we don’t want the pieces to overlap too much. One of the challenges is soliciting a range of well-argued positions ... mainly it is me making the selection, but I also seek advice. (pers. comm. 7-8 November 2016)

There were seven responses to Goldsworthy’s essay, all from women. Her correspondents mostly encompassed a range of varying feminist perspectives and were mostly critical of her work, claiming she did not cover enough of what really matters from a global feminist standpoint; that there are deep and horrendous issues women face every day, and that she did not go far enough in her essay; or indeed, that her perceptions were naïve and middle class.

Rebecca Huntley, a social researcher, wrote that Gillard’s speech ‘provoked a cathartic roar’ within Huntley’s own social media space, which connected women who have experienced any level of sexist behaviour anywhere in their lives (2013). For Huntley, the speech ‘triggered something more like a whisper’. Regardless, it was heard. In her ‘Correspondence’ Huntley writes: ‘I feel [Goldsworthy’s] argument leaves important issues unexplored and pays too much attention to topics that have already been well examined by others’ (99). Huntley applauds Goldsworthy’s analysis of how the ABC’s Q&A discussed Gina Rinehart: ‘Gillard, the most powerful person in Australia, and Rinehart, the richest person in Australia, both women, both ridiculed for being apparently ugly and unfuckable. Shame’ (99). But she also argues that some of what Goldsworthy wrote about had too tenuous a connection to the central topic: ‘... the observations on gonzo porn, Hilary Mantel, SlutWalks, *Fifty Shades*, *Girls* etc.’ (100).

In a separate ‘Correspondence’, journalist, author, and current director of the Sydney Writer’s Festival, Michaela McGuire, lauds Goldsworthy’s essay, though she adds: ‘I’ve no doubt some will be quick to note that Goldsworthy has not spoken enough of the effects of sex and misogyny on non-white women, poor women, uneducated women’ (2013: 103). While writer and feminist Sara Dowse responds as only a founding feminist could – ‘Oh no, not again!’ (2013: 108). Historical and retrospective in context, she criticises Goldsworthy for her ‘lack of an economic perspective’ (108). Dowse writes eloquently, querying the precise definition of misogyny versus sexism. While Goldsworthy suggests women should be searching for subjectivity, Dowse argues that they need to be urged toward ‘agency’. She concludes: ‘For that’s what feminism has really been about. Instead of falling for “I”, we might just start thinking again about “We”’ (2013: 111).

Sylvia Lawson uses Goldsworthy’s essay to write of a more global perspective, contextualising the essay as of a ‘first-world’ ilk. Her greatest criticism of Goldsworthy is that: ‘The first-world sphere of understanding can’t be sealed off from the rest; and that’s the limitation on Goldsworthy’s argument’ (2013: 118). But, less of a critique of

Goldsworthy's essay, Lawson takes the opportunity to argue for her own political standpoint, stipulating that any writing on feminism in this country must also look outward.

Commentator, author, and radio presenter Helen Razer's response is the shortest but perhaps the most visceral. She accuses Goldsworthy of producing content equivalent to a 'first year cultural studies class', suggesting that Goldsworthy's work is a 'ham-fisted deconstruction' (2013: 116). Razer critiques Goldsworthy's stance, that of a 'middle class feminist hive-mind' (Ibid.) producing no substantive evidence, and urges Goldsworthy to attend to the Australian Bureau of Statistics to find the evidence needed to begin to discuss sexism in this country.

Angela Shanahan, a journalist with the *Australian*, is also scathing about the integrity of Goldsworthy's argument. She writes: 'I was tempted to laugh, yawn and cry through Goldsworthy's bizarrely lurid and confused ideological essay on modern misogyny' (2013a: 112). But perhaps her most biting commentary is where she writes of Emily's List, a network which supports women seeking political office. Shanahan calls it a 'cabal' and 'sexist closed shop' that propels women into government office, suggesting that many of Labor's women politicians kick-started their careers this way (113). But there is more underpinning Shanahan's response: Goldsworthy cites from some of Shanahan's own reporting within 'Unfinished Business', and Shanahan takes the opportunity to defend her work. She accuses Goldsworthy of taking her words out of context. She then includes a slab of her own article on the Misogyny Speech and feminism as a notion, the article Goldsworthy critiques in her essay. Shanahan writes scathingly: 'I and many others are fed up with the empty, power-obsessed rhetoric of feminism trotted out to cover every failure, both ethical and practical' (2013: 114).

Goldsworthy was surprised by the correspondence she received and particularly by the strong and direct criticism, which she found worryingly silencing. She says:

What I was anticipating was a lot of opposition from, I guess, anti-feminists or supporters of Alan Jones, or, you know, entrenched misogynous conservatives who were opposed to everything I said, and that's not really where I got the flak from in terms of the reader response, the published response. A lot of it was from feminists who took umbrage at the fact that I'd written about certain difficulties facing women, privileged women in Australia, and I hadn't kind of comprehensively covered the entire woes of women worldwide ... It's a very funny thing actually, and I felt a bit burnt by the response to it in a way, and I'm not alone in this ... I think that the sort of conception that there's limited space on the soapbox and so if you get on the soap box you really have to make a sweeping statement about everything, and of course there are huge problems facing women worldwide. Poverty [and] violence particularly, and all sorts of horrors that far transcend the evil of Alan Jones inciting hatred against Julia Gillard. But I just think if we only ever spoke about that and never allowed ourselves to speak about anything closer to home – well it's a great way of silencing the feminist conversation. So I think I was a just a bit surprised. (pers. comm. 9 March 2016)

Goldsworthy claims the 'unpublished' general public on the whole responded in a much kinder, positive, and more constructive fashion, and that she found many young women

with whom the essay resonated deeply. But she admits that she was hurt by the feminist backlash she had received on the ‘Correspondence’ pages. She says:

I actually think I did feel a bit sort of worn out by it. I just thought, ‘Goodness, is this what happens to a woman when she dares to venture into the public sphere and say a few things about what’s facing women?’ And the people that she incurs criticism from are not those that she’s actually going after but from the very women she’s sort of speaking on behalf of, and it actually, I think, perhaps discouraged me a little from venturing any further into that domain. Yeah, I found it tiring. (pers. comm. 9 March 2016)

Interestingly, at the Wheeler Centre three years before our conversation, Goldsworthy told Sophie Black:

I think it is, in its own curious way, a form of silencing to insist that every time a woman opens her mouth she represents the whole gender; she can’t. And I think Julia Gillard suffered from that, and from the weight of expectations that we all put on her. She was our first feminist prime minister. She was our first female prime minister, and we wanted her to be the perfect feminist, and we wanted her to be the perfect prime minister, and we wanted to be able to agree and applaud everything she did. But she’s a person, and surely the ultimate result of feminism is that women get to be people, just like men. (Goldsworthy qtd. in Black 2013)

When we are talking, Goldsworthy seems to almost continue with her thoughts from the Wheeler Centre public interview:

It’s also very sexist because there’s no similar expectation of men to get up and speak for every single problem facing men around the world. I mean it’s ludicrous. I mean curiously, ironically, it’s something I sort of discuss in the essay, but even having it there wasn’t enough, I suppose, to inoculate me from that very response that I’d prescribed to in the pages of the essay. (pers. comm. 9 March 2016)

Constructive criticism should never hurt; it should help continue conversations and dialoguing. If it hurts it is probably because it is more frustrating than constructively critical: there will always be another aspect or notion to consider, particularly when tackling issues constellating feminism. Attempting to write a long-form essay on the state of cultural feminism in Australia is brave, but it shouldn’t be. The criticism did hurt Goldsworthy, though, predominantly, she says it surprised her. But as a component of the whole model, the correspondence to Goldsworthy’s essay and Goldsworthy’s response to that, perform as a public dialogical and polemical space. *Quarterly Essay* as a unique platform serves up to the public subjective, yet elegant and deeply researched renderings every three months on integral Australian matters. Each essay begins an issue-based public conversation and by including the latter two sections of the periodical – ‘Correspondence’ and ‘Response to Correspondence’ – manages to perpetuate and advance this particular conversation for a significant period of time each year. Accordingly (and as a part of the model), this is then reflected and discussed throughout other media outlets, creating even further reach into the citizenry. Appropriately, Goldsworthy has the last say in her ‘Response to Correspondence’. She signs it off with great dignity: ‘Much remains to be done, as our correspondents have remarked, in areas ranging from education to superannuation to child care. Cultural

change might be a slow tectonic process, but it deserves some attention too' (2013a: 123).

Conclusion

Through textual analysis and narrative discursive inquiry this paper attempts to unpack the writing process involved in composing a long-form essay for Black Inc.'s *Quarterly Essay*, a format unique to Australia, rendered by some of the best-known writers and commentators in the country. Perhaps this is one element of its success – writers read and admired in other formats, write this 20-30,000 word artefact enabling its readership to get up more closely and more personally to them and how they think, than ever before. As Singer and Walker write: 'There's no question that there's a special intimacy that comes from recognising the voice of an essay ... as the author's, from listening to that author think and wonder, reminisce, confess or reflect' (2013: 2). Focussing on the 50th issue essay, 'Unfinished Business: Sex, Freedom and Misogyny', by Anna Goldsworthy, this paper also contextualises it as an example of the crucial long-form essay contribution that *Quarterly Essay* performs in the Australian literary/political/cultural/intellectual environment. The respondents to Goldsworthy's essay are assessed as a constituent and integral component of how 'the essay' can function in a potentially liberal and democratic First-World society, as demonstrated by the periodical. Each issue of *Quarterly Essay* has the potential to begin a public conversation about an issue or issue-based matters significant to national identity, thought and hope. As such, the essay here performs as a platform for dialogic commentary, with its considered and reflective voice disrupting the 24/7 pace of news dissemination and social media proliferation. And, integrally, as Annie Dillard wrote of essayists a little less than 30 years ago: 'Writers serve as the memory of a people. They chew over our public past' (1988: xxi). This is what *Quarterly Essay* continues to contribute and archive in contemporary Australia today.

Endnotes

1. *The Monthly* has been published since 2005 and is Australia's leading current affairs magazine. It has regularly won the Current Affairs, Business & Finance category at the Australian Magazine Awards. *The Best Australian Essays* are published annually and are edited each year by a leading literary figure.
2. Feik is also Associate Editor of *The Monthly* and a publisher at Black Inc.
3. A full transcript of Julia Gillard's speech, delivered on 10 October 2012, can be found at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/transcript-of-julia-gillard-s-speech-20121009-27c36.html>
4. The award-winning author and poet Peter Goldsworthy, who is also a medical practitioner.

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