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Charles Darwin University and University of Mumbai

Adelle Sefton-Rowston and Sunil Sharma

The Les Murray of our imaginations: Darwin to Mumbai

Abstract:

This article sees paired Australian and Indian poets, Adelle Sefton-Rowston and Sunil Sharma, come together to compare their home cities from different locations and sensibilities. Adelle writes of Darwin – a small tropical city in Northern Australia – while Sunil captures the cultural context of developing Mumbai. The authors offer a discursive exchange, trying to locate similar struggles and concerns about the cities they each live in, and contrasting their different demographics and lifestyles as a common poetical province. Both Australia and India share a legacy of colonisation and its associated violences. Yet the experiences of coloniser and colonised are very different. How do two different poets from either country and positions of racial power find an interconnected space to openly share their contemporary experiences of place and belonging? What are the more nuanced survival tactics associated with belonging to each place? Darwin and Mumbai converge in this duoethnography, as poets explore the symmetries of life in this unique literary project pinned together through a global poet. Serendipitously the pair share a common transnational bond through Les Murray's work, as Adelle creates a conceptual mosaic from the late author's words, describing her home, while Sunil reflects on his own personal encounter with Murray some years ago.

Biographical notes:

Adelle Sefton-Rowston is a senior lecturer and author of *Politics and Poetics: race relations and reconciliation in Australian Literature* (2020) and is a founding editor of new Northern Territory literary journal *Borderlands Magazine*.

Sunil Sharma is a senior academic and author-freelance journalist from suburban Mumbai, India. He has published 21 books so far, some solo and joint. He edits *Setu*.

Keywords:

Cities – Mumbai – Darwin – Les Murray – conceptual poetry – duoethnography

Introduction

The function of great art is to reveal, delight and instruct the seekers of new epistemology, new gospels, new validations of old verities in an uncertain age. In a cynical age, fostered in a big way by post-truth political dispensations and popular media, art tells you how to live meaningfully and to create meanings out of absurd situations, in more de-radicalised mass society, facing climate change, earth-degradation, violence, terror and divisive political ideologies. Making sense of apocalypses. Dystopias. Decoding the dysfunctional.

We often navigate varied spaces in our terrestrial journeys, journeys rooted in a time and space continuum for the mortal coils but, sometimes, for wandering minds of artists or readers, these spatial-temporal dimensions, moments of the universe or the dualisms of human experience, do not apply mechanically to the off-grid coordinates of mental journeys. These particular species – beings with cultivated and heightened imaginations – can both conjure up sensory, musical, abstract or imagined worlds, and navigate the same sets of parallel realities, the aesthetic kingdoms, the alternative histories, myths and futures – courtesy of their evolved literary faculties, dreams, aspirations and liberal-democratic values – sans the laws of gravity, physics, holding them down, in their here-and-now instances.

Some call it a transcendental trait – the ability to travel, as navigator, past, present, future and, most importantly, to identify with the voice of the literary texts and thereby, set up affinities, most unlikely in political zones but common in artistic countries of Shakespeare, Goethe, T. S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Tolstoy or Günter Grass, to name but a few stalwarts. This uniquely human feature to embrace and empathise with the best of the fine arts via individual imagination and sympathetic readings of iconic texts reveals truths through fictions and lies, and is extraordinary in both range and affect. One may read Dante and feel that *lapsed* timeframe, that world buried, then coming alive, before your startled eyes and a mind awakened by a robust and active imagination.

In April 2019 the world lost one of its greatest stalwarts in literary history when famous poet Les Murray died at the age of 80 years old. He had written over 30 volumes of poetry, much about the Australian ‘bush’ and more uniquely its lush tropical areas of the North as well. But his poems could take any one of us home in a single line. A world far away, distanced from the new-millennial Mumbai or Darwin, made real, concrete, immediate, like a holy vision granted to the blessed minority of a prosaic age. Murray’s work has an ability to simultaneously make one present in two varied time spans, dimensions, histories, memories – seamless time-travel to-and-forth; this expert navigation of his work is often a balancing act, a remarkable mental journey that leads to epiphanies and a delight in new discoveries, in geographies and cultures lost in the mists of time, in terms of the strict chronology of events and eras, or, present somewhere in *this-moment* of a Murakami-territory, or yet to dawn, Asimov-like future, some point of time on a red horizon.

To begin is a conceptual experiment whereby the first author of this poetic exchange, Adelle collates a poem about her home in Darwin from different words and lines from *The Best 100 poems of Les Murray*. Her poem is entitled:

'An ode to Les Murray' by Adelle Sefton-Rowston

i.

It is serious to be with humans
so much climbing, on a spherical world
Globe, globe, globe, globe.
Quite often the world is not round
and all our projections fail to curve where it curves.

We are language species
translating the universe into science
believing that otherwise it has no meaning.
People watching their mouths,
ground-cricket sing and pause.

ii.

On Summer nights
insect prey at the peak of our hearing
Bees hum their shift in;
for once not travelling to arrive.
It is the season of the long narrow city; the tops of palms exclaim.

Crime flashes in strange windscreens, in the time of the holiday.
At it unmoved: the homes of fun hanging above ferns.
Un-thinning mists of white
the storm carries a greenish-grey bag.
Unprotected lightning: here are his wild horses.

Some people like to steal this energy and lie in it
reminding all your fluids, that tropics
sweat for you.
Feet, beach, sand, hair
to go home and wear shorts forever.

iii.

The dead trees in the dam flower each morning with birds.
Knob-headed magpie geese
row into the air ahead of us.
An increasing sky-birth of meteors
passing the place of the dingo trap.
Sometimes the million join in with jokes:
How to get a baby in the Northern Territory?

Just stick your finger down a dingo's throat.

No small births could have happened but exceptions shine:
the spread eagle with the fireworks display on its belly
around the sun
are turning the wedgetail eagle and her mates,
hovering down at the wetlands.

Now the ibis are flying in
leaning out of their wings.
Those hills are ancient stone
Gods just beginning to be literature
Trees, planets, rivers, time.

The only sun is down
Intensely deep
In the dam's be-whiskered mirror
earth
fully healed from that labour.

As it turns out, the second author, Sunil Sharma, has met Les Murray before and cherishes a signed copy of Murray's *Tap Dogs' Music* as sacred literary memorabilia. According to Sunil, the tribute was sent to Les Murray through a common friend Rob Harle, an artist of high calibre, from Lismore, Australia. Sunil writes how Murray was very happy and sent a hand-written note to him – described as a real treasure.

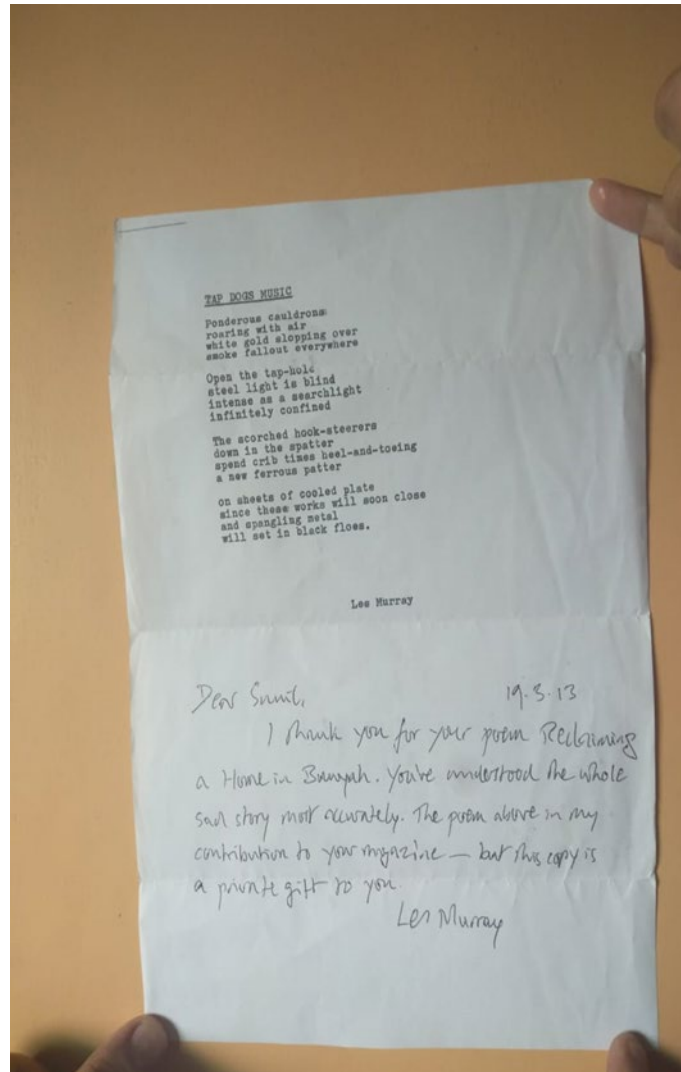


Figure One: Photograph of signed letter from Les Murray to Sunil Sharma

'Reclaiming a home in Bunyah' by Susheel Sharma

Les Murray returns from Sydney
To reclaim a personal heritage –
His childhood home
Full of memories of
Time spent on
A dairy farm;
Of a woodcutter father
Working hard there,
Mother who died,
And a feud silent
Between a grandfather
And a dad,
Unable to forget and forgive,

The trees full of white ants,
That killed one of the siblings.
The promised farm never materialized,
And his dad went back to the tree-cutting,
In order to survive;
The return from Sydney
Was reclaiming his regional
Australian roots,
And finding again there
The continent's true face!
Among the aboriginals, farmers and authors,
The great Murray,
The Bard of Australia,
Discovered the Soul of his
Culture that was missing
In the glittering cities.
Urban centers are
Alike these days
Everywhere but the way
Farmers in rural Australia
Work hard against the odds,
Gets mirrored in poets and writers,
And like First Nations people,
These communities carry nature
Within their selves as sacred,
And that act of getting connected
With nature in a sublime way,
Makes Murray the great voice,
Booming,
Coming down from
Outback/steppes/deserts
You hear often,
On lonely nights,
On the desolate highways,
Echoing loudly –
In the fevered,
Rational,
Calculating,
Profit-seeking,
Stock-exchange-fixed
Minds and hearts.

In response to learning this connection with Les Murray, Adelle writes another 'ode to Les Murray', again inspired by the words and imagery of the late poet. These poems are conceptual

in style, whereby each line comes from one of his best 100 poems, arranging each individual line in such a way however, to create a collage of depictions of people and place that are fitting of the Northern Territory, or more specifically Darwin. While Sunil's poem, 'Reclaiming a home in Bunyah' makes a profound observation of how Murray was in search of the 'continent's true face', Adelle goes on a similar quest, attempting to include the tropics in a national narrative and portrayal of the country in her second piece.

'Ode to Les Murray II' by Adelle Sefton-Rowston

i.

I accept all colours, and with a warming hum
step out like a space walker.
Glorious Apollo.
They speak control
to satellites
in high bursts of algorithm
Looking for a city.

As night comes down, the houses watch each other:
survey cloudy flame-trees, the plain of streets,
the future.
The houses there wear verandas out of shyness
aloft among bougainvillea
Squeezed gardens
new greenstuff.

ii.

Houses stand in the banana zone, in the poinciana tropics
as soldiers, in the tropic wars.
Cool nights are eerie with retracting flaps
drinkers under cyclonic pressure,
pineapple abdomen, agog with water
reminding all your fluids, streaming off your points
that the tropics sweat for you.

Lightning will crack, extend, and vanish upwards from
the extensible wet life-chains of which
we enter domains of flowering lotus.
When black snakes go to Hell they are
God's creation
Set aside for mystic poetry
Sweat and flowing rumps and language.

iii.

Stanley would crack the snake for practice
 thronged lightning making the leanest thunder.
 Waterlilies on their stems, circling
 beneath the surface, like dreams.
 Hot climates
 bring us to finely stinking places
 Meadows of the monsoon wetland.

And if these things are done in the green season
 What to do in the crystalline dry?
 To the bush, or as we now say the Land
 I step out this caravan
 to survey distant plateau cliffs,
 unfolding into reality
 lost children in the bush.

Through this montage, we see how new meanings can be generated by further radicalising Les Murray's texts and lines. The only problem for lesser mortals like us: not every writer has this kind of Adelle-vision and literary imagination to engender a newer version of their favourite authors to meet the needs of another succeeding age, an age of incorporation, compromise and mindless consumerism of pastiche. One can learn a lot from her poetic style and synthesis of canonical texts with newer understandings, locations and methodologies of interpretation – bold hermeneutical acts – that posit the reader at the centre of a given textual universe, and these freshly spawned intertextualities both elevate and uplift the recipient's consciousness itself. Like Borges, Adelle creates her Les Murray and this new Murray is a national chronicler made to work for the changed socio-economic realities and speak to the contemporary listener. It is an innovative method of selection, reading and writing – and usefully employing/deploying older texts for producing newer meanings for succeeding time-lines through artistic presentation and amplification. One can call it *Nouveau Writings*, at the forefront of *avant-garde*, a must for renovating the language, tropes, syntax and idiom of literature and criticism. Like the London of T.S. Eliot, the Ode to Murray created by Adelle reflects every post-modern space and thus, oddly, makes the reader a meaning-generating scripiter, a poet of a different kind, erecting their own scaffolds of critical consciousness.

'Exit' by Sunil Sharma

Mumbai!
 The local trains are rushing out of the CST/Church gate
 terminus
 Breathless, bloated, after every two minutes. Tired faces buffeted
 by a sea breeze, humid and hot. The cars are packed; commuters
 are hanging out to catch stale air. Bulging briefcases, folded

dailies, hand-held hankies. Each immersed in their smart-phones. Hoot of the local leaving/arriving in the terminus –

huge womb of the city full of standardized people.

Exit!

Exiting is possible.

But nobody exits, despite a shrill political rhetoric. Despite the City being ballooned and badly gasping!

Like a kite, they are suspended between a live wire and a polluted sky...by a simple thread; twisting in the air that stings eyes.

Local trains

Hurting

Up

Down

In a frenzy.

Mumbai –

Manic

Energetic,

A bit reclaimed by everybody.

‘Exit’ implies Les Murray’s quest to find the ‘soul of his culture’. This too is something that many Northern Territorians struggle with as a result of being so geographically isolated from major cities ‘down south’, such as Sydney and Melbourne. These cities are perhaps the ‘glittering cities’ mentioned in the poem, and analogous with the size and business of beloved Mumbai. Unlike Mumbai, however, we do not have trams or trains in Darwin (only buses) for public transport. The buses are slow and cumbersome, pulling into bus stops only every twenty minutes, if lucky. The terminus mentioned in ‘Exit’ is somewhat a foreign landscape of everyday commuters with briefcases and hankies. The culture of Darwin is far more laid back, and people’s dress sense is dependent on thongs, t-shirts and shorts because it is so hot. The people are far from ‘standardised’ and come from many different places; sometimes they may be excommunicated and looking for a new home in Darwin to begin again. The saying goes that if you live in Darwin you are either a misfit or a missionary. Hence, the allusion to alien-like people in one new poem, as we are very different to city people in other parts of the country.

There are many people in Darwin obsessed with ‘space and galaxies’ and we have dedicated UFO watching pads just outside the city for people to watch for spaceships travelling across the skies. There is good visibility of the stars in Darwin as it is a small city and unlike Mumbai there is not much light pollution – we are fortunately without ‘the air that stings eyes’ mentioned in your poem ‘Exit’. There are many weird and eccentric characters here too, and analogous to ‘Exit’, many arrive and never leave. Yet, Darwin is like Mumbai because it is a place that is ‘a bit reclaimed by everybody.’

The description of Mumbai is intriguing and much comes to mind when we read about the streets ‘paved with gold’. Assumedly there is an upper class that is far more affluent than any self-acclaimed ‘rich’ people in Darwin. Here wealth is measured rather in exuberant amounts of leisure time, having land, horses, boats and big cars. The nightlife is really only one or two of the main streets, and these are littered with bars and restaurants. But there are many fights because there is such a high concentration of people in a small area of the city on weekends. Drinking alcohol is a big part of the culture, particularly because it is hot, and people are always thirsty. But the people here are also very relaxed. So relaxed, that if there is a cyclone warning, people will flock to the bottle shop, top up alcohol supplies, and have what is colloquially known as a ‘cyclone party’. People can be bunkered into their concrete bathrooms all night amongst a bath full of beer.

‘Dusk’ by Sunil Sharma

Evening!

It hardly arrives.

Transition from late afternoon into early evening is rapid: It changes into a golden light of the sodium-vapour lamps lined up along the roads locked up like innards; the afternoon sunrays fading into a gloom temporary; followed by a sudden glow of instant – or, almost – light, even, smooth, like a golden foil over sweets. Entire swathes

Covered in that only; of course, punctured here-there by gloomy spots, frequented by addicts.

From a flyover – you cannot fly over as most get choked most of the time – the swathes look dazzling.

They say Mumbai streets are paved with gold.

It has its own underbelly.

And nightlife.

Hmm!

That means bars and restaurants only!

I have seen dusk in many cities.

Here – it looks like the eyes of a latch-key child!

‘Dusk in Suburbs’ by Sunil Sharma

Have you ever

Realized the loneliness of a

Solitary

Figure?

In a dusky suburban place?

Reclining on a broken bench on the last platform, that corner

near the stinking washroom, dark and stinky? A figure shunned
By others like, hmm, a plague!
A matted, bearded guy, babbling, wearing clothes encrusted with
dried dust and stains of mud.
Excommunicated.
Or that solitary tree, the last one,
On that pavement, near the tracks, hedges, garbage dump.
It reminds me of a painter who died unsung.

‘Dusk in Suburbs’ captures the senses so acutely, especially the sense of smell in Mumbai. Loneliness and stench make for a very interesting dualism, and from a comparative viewpoint, there is much homelessness in Darwin too. As a frontier town, and one of the last places in Australia to be colonised by the British, homeless people are mostly Indigenous Australians and racism is the root cause of many ‘solitary figures’, as described in ‘Dusk in Suburbs’. The poem really makes one think of how each person has a story, and that the lonely person on the street who may be drunk or unwell, could very well become the ‘painter who died unsung’. Poetry can capture so much before a person dies, and Les Murray is certainly testament to that.

Les Murray talks of his national experience and human condition within the context of his own country, yet a reader or writer from India or elsewhere, outside Australia, oddly enough, feels connected with the famous poet and returns with fresh insights and energies, forged out of this odd alliance with a subhuman redneck, a bard of the bush, an unofficial poet laureate of the Down Under who creates a strong vernacular for his nation by shaking, dusting and cleaning old English the way only eminent poets are known to do. Once a point of entry is secured, a vista gingerly opens somewhere, and the unilateral exploration begins. And similarities are glimpsed. At that precise moment of connectivity, reception-junction, a consciousness of a higher order, almost spiritual, writers like Les Murray are reclaimed and their relevance extended and immediacy established; a kind of cross-cultural but deeply human connection gets set up.

Murray’s Australia becomes a metaphorical country and signifies a transnational system of signifiers about *la condition humaine* to the one pursuing the trail and identical imageries established between source and recipient consciousness. Other words, simpler, Murray speaks for us all. His own country that mirrors grim realities of our own country and times.

At that precise entry-point, we come to realise that deep down, literary texts decode human experience, under a given social formation, and show the way ahead for the faithful reader as the explorer of other worlds. The magic happens then.

We tend to produce our individual semiotics; we create our own meanings and thus renew the life of the text and, by extension, of the given author, beyond a shelf date. Locating such structural homologies, sites, affinities, kinship is an act of good faith and hermeneutics and happens only with serious art, not kitsch. When a writer like Adelle consciously writes an ode to Murray and pays a heart-felt, sincere and grateful tribute, this very act of re-imagining and re-writing Murray not only extends the embedded tissues of meanings, such as Rolland

Barthes' iconic texts, but also contemporarises and re-vitalises an artistic vision of a given time-span and the underlying humanist-liberal principles of these deathless works of art and artists. These greats then pass on into heritage, world heritage, to be referenced by coming generations of hungry/angry artists.

Layering lines upon lines from a mine of gold called otherwise by the name of Les Murray, a project such as this is a subversive manifesto and through such intertextuality and smart re-telling, produces a new work of art; deeper and profounder, this strange collage of previous works, and at that time, again, we are made to realize that a posthumous voice of a master can be heard distinctly in stunning ways and modes; that such voices can never be silenced and that, finally, they have their own hauntology, to be mapped again and again, by critics and scholars alike.

It is homologous to his Mumbai, and her Darwin, as London is to any other city – felt, experienced, imagined, re-imagined and re-packaged – theirs and ours, in common and shared literary geographies of mind and imagination. Every writing is an initiation of a dialogue with the respective reader. Every writer is a reader first, then a writer, a generator of new codes and semiotics. And chosen texts – sacred sites of communion between originating masters and their acolytes – facilitate cognition of our times through the shock of recognition, of setting up homologies, of arriving at new perspectives. Through writings and other modes of special communication, we mix and talk with each other, often adding a fresh dimension, a spiritual plane, as soothing as the dawn of the spring. The present venture, due to the overarching vision of its editors, enables that holy dialogue between fellow writers with great imagination and vision, and, with this particular team, all this happens under the benign gaze of Les Murray, as much loved in Australia as in India, and elsewhere, for articulating the general mood of a nation. The conversation continues, re-validated and re-energised. And moves forward a discourse sublime, leaving tiny footprints on the sands of time. Or, till the time, more footprints join the old trail and the journey begins afresh, forming a continuum and an expanding community of the guardians of truths, in mass societies that have come to hate the spiritual productions that elevate but do not bring profits, acts of subversion that challenge the status quo and in the long run, often, aid the painful process of dismantling these high edifices. Together, Adelle and Sunil have created newer patterns and ways of feeling and seeing the common things around town. Les Murray lives on in our creative imaginations, defamiliarising the everyday, in a style unheard:

And if these things are done in the green season
 What to do in the crystalline dry?
 To the bush, or as we now say the Land
 I step out this caravan
 to survey distant plateau cliffs,
 unfolding into reality
 lost children in the bush.
 (From: "Ode to Les Murray II", part III)

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