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Introduction

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Introduction

Poetry, it seems to me, raises the questions of margins and marginality in obvious ways ... and yet poetry is central in terms of its contribution to language and thought. (Hecq 2005)

Liminality indicates a border, a line, and thus some style of crisis – some turn, or act of turning, of crossing from one place or state to another (Meads 2019: 5). It is the discovery of a limit, and simultaneously, realisation that the limit is not the end. There is always some *further* into and through which to step. What seems a wall is a skin is an interstice is warping, stretching, porous. Like the ‘/’ in the ‘im/possible’ and ‘both/and’, such lines are zones, spaces, gaps for opening and unfolding, sites for play and experimentation, for testing, dreaming, discovering. The liminal is thus imbued with potential: hitherto-unthought thoughts become articulable, letting new knowledges and ways of knowing come to be (Meads 2019: 5-6).

In the field of translation studies, the term *interliminality* is sometimes used to evoke the complex dynamics that arise at points of overlap or contact between differing liminalities of language, culture, geography, and more (Rigby 2017: 2). This fosters a ‘space of enunciation’ and ‘intercultural exchange’, sparking ‘further cultural and linguistic interaction’ (Rigby 2017: 2). It produces potentials consistent with those Homi Bhabha described as the ‘third space’ – one ‘based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity’ (qtd. in Rigby 2017: 18). This space can, in turn, support ‘a sense of connectedness despite the fragmentation of modernity’, for ‘it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity’ (17).

The articles in this special issue do not involve translation in the conventional sense of re-creating a text from one language for readers who come to it via another. All of them, however, involve acts of collaborative poetic inquiry across literal and metaphoric distances of culture, location, language, lived experience, and more. Poetic inquiry describes the multiple and diverse range of research methodologies that in some way engage ‘the power of poetry to invite us as writers and readers into a very different, direct, and distinct way of being in and understanding the world and ourselves within it’ (Prendergast 2015: 683). In line with broader arguments such as that of Jen Webb for words as ‘good for thinking’ – or in other words generating knowledges, including but exceeding research knowledges (2010) – poetic inquiry valuably enables modes of thought and ways of knowing that differ from and complement those typically accessible through prose and other more commonly-practised modes of research writing. By Monica Prendergast’s account, this is particularly pertinent for research projects

focused on ‘equity, human rights, and justice worldwide’, for ‘poetic inquiry invites us to engage as active witnesses within our research sites, as witnesses standing beside participants in their search for justice, recognition, healing, a better life’ (2015: 683).

Given poetry’s associations with margins and the marginal (Hecq 2005), an argument lies in wait that poetic inquiry always entails some scope for engagement of the liminal and its knowledge-generative capacities, and that collaboration between two or more parties through poetic inquiry tends to multiply these potentials, especially when collaborations stretch across cultural, geographic and/or experiential divides, bringing the creative charge of intersecting interliminalities into play. This special issue collates twelve articles based on collaborative inquiries of this nature, through which poets situated in various parts of India and Australia were across a two-year period (2018-2020) paired and encouraged to share samples of poetry, then engage in email-based dialogues on themes of culture, space, place, belonging, and anything else the sharing of writings revealed for them about similarities and differences between their distant locales.

The project’s initial plan involved a sequence of defined steps. The first was for each participating poet to initially submit three poems relating to place, places, or related issues such as culture, identity, ecologies, belonging, and so on. Following this, we, the editors, reviewed the submissions and partnered poets in different countries based on thematic or other potential connections between their works. We introduced the poets via email and gave them three months to read each other’s poems; then, each poet was tasked with writing and sharing three poems in response to the ones they had received, and either following or in tandem with this process, to engage in email-based dialogues about new knowledges and perspectives gleaned through the processes of reading and writing in response to one another, including anything that surprised or fascinated them about their partner poet’s response to their own initial poems. As this editorial later explains, not all of the partnerships followed this model precisely, but all of them – in some way or another – stemmed from this model as a starting point for the multiple forms of creative interaction that ultimately arose.

Like the articles it compiles, the project’s background involves a meeting and connection formed between two people from different backgrounds, united by shared passions for poetry, social justice, and solidarity across distances of culture, geography, and more. We, the co-editors of this issue, each bear a long-standing interest in the scope for literary and cultural connections between our two locales. For Jaydeep Sarangi, of Kolkata, this has involved – since 2010 – visits to Australian universities and collaborations with Australian poets including Tamaso Lonsdale and Robert Maddox-Harle, with whom Sarangi has worked on cross-national poetry anthologies, for instance the recent *Dancing the Light* (eds Maddox-Harle & Sarangi 2020). Sarangi also bears a long-standing connection with the journal. For Amelia Walker, of Adelaide, a love of Indian literature, especially poetry, began with a love of writers including Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, and Rabindranath Tagore, and flourished via a visit to India in 2008 during which Walker spent the bulk of her time in Kolkata, participating in poetry events and *adda* at the College Street Coffee House, developing friendships she maintains long-distance to this day.

Sarangi and Walker connected virtually in 2016 after Walker favourably reviewed Debashish Lahiri's poetry collection, *No Waiting Like Departure* (Lahiri 2016), which Sarangi helped to publish. In 2017, Sarangi and Walker met in person when Sarangi visited Adelaide to deliver a series of guest lectures and readings at universities and local poetry events. It was at this first meeting that we commenced discussion about the potentials for bringing together poet-academics from India and Australia, and thus began developing the ideas that, across subsequent email exchanges, gradually cohered into a special issue proposal, and thereby the suite of works we now present.

Our objectives for this project were:

- To bring poets from India and Australia together to engage in dialogues about similarities and differences between our countries and cultures;
- To develop critical studies on poetry between the nations, and thus open new dimensions for ongoing collaborative studies;
- To raise awareness among Australian poets about the breadth and diversity of poetry in India, and likewise to raise awareness among Indian poets about Australian poetry;
- To generally raise awareness about socio-political issues including economic inequalities, environmental issues, issues of gender, and more.

These objectives reflect our perceptions of poetry's role in contemporary times. Key to this role is that poetry can connect people across many forms of distances, including global geographic boundaries, but also distances of culture, class, sexuality, gender, caste, embodiment, age, spirituality, and more. In line with the concept described by Stuart Hall, we perceive poetry as a mode of *articulation* – a means of elucidating what we as people from different backgrounds share, or may become able to share, while maintaining respect for vital particularities of experience, identity, and desire (Hall 1984). Through times of struggle, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, poetry may offer a sense of solace and solidarity. It may also contribute to dialogues about socio-political concerns such as environmental sustainability and modes of social inequality including but exceeding economic divides, inequalities of gender, and hierarchical social divides. For Sarangi, as a translator of poetry by Dalit-identifying writers, and a contributor to the scholarly field of Dalit Studies, poetry is in these senses 'a shoulder for the subaltern' and a means towards realising more just and livable societies for everyone (Sarangi 2020).

That poetry can play this role and contribute towards such objectives is reflected in the twelve articles that the poets involved in this project ultimately produced, and which we feel honoured to publish and share. The first two of these both set up the idea of the poetic exchange, connecting it with cultural traditions of personal letters as an oft-ignored literary practice, and of epistolary writing as a textual device long associated with feminist, postcolonial, and broadly social-justice orientated modes of literary production (Okparanta 2013). In 'Letters from Adelaide and Prayagraj', Arnis Silvia and Susheel K Sharma demonstrate poetry's ability to

bring together people who have never met in person because its shifted conventions of language and grammar enable shades of intimacy beyond those possible through standard registers of email correspondence and formal letter writing. The pair's article anticipates many themes that resurge throughout the issue, especially ecological concerns, and also questions of identity as it relates to place, culture, language, and migration. This second point is taken up in focus in the article from Mags Webster and Sharmila Ray, which draws on Paul Celan and Martin Buber to probe phenomena of self-other relations, or in other words, how one's sense of self is bound with and transformed by other selves with whom one connects. This includes reflections on the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly questions of how we forge and maintain social relations in scenarios of physical distance.

Following these first two papers, the third and fourth demonstrate one way in which poetry and other modes of literature can enable connection across physical and other divides – namely, through recognition of shared literary precursors and/or reading passions. In the exchange between Zinia Mitra and Pablo Muslera, discussion of this entails consideration of similarities and differences between the canonical literary figures of Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare. Adelle Sefton-Rowston and Sunil Sharma meanwhile make the unlikely realisation of a shared appreciation for the works of the late Les Murray, proceeding to reflect on how his writings inform their own. Proceeding from this are two articles between poet pairings who focused on ecological themes via practices of ecopoetry and environmental writing. For Dominic Symes and Bishnupada Ray, topography becomes 'the evidence of scarring; a demonstration of the pain of displacement' and geography 'an insight into the nature of human domination and oppression'. KV Dominic and Amelia Walker raise similar issues of environmental degradation, but with a particular focus on how manifestations of these problems in India and Australia can be understood as ongoing consequences of British invasion or colonisation and associated atrocities.

As seems almost inevitable in any multi-collaboratory project such as this one, there were some poet pairings for which circumstances panned out such that the initially-proposed process of email-based dialogic exchange proved either practically unfeasible and/or creatively less desirable than other ways of working. In some cases, one member of the partnership needed to withdraw or reduce their role due to illness, caring responsibilities, or personal scenarios, including unexpected challenges produced by the pandemic. In other cases, poets juggling hectic schedules and competing demands remained able and willing to commit time to the project, but could not synchronise their availability to maintain a flowing sequence of email correspondence with their partner poet over the same sustained time period. The articles by Dominique Hecq, Bashabi Fraser, Jenn Webb with Bidhu Padhi, Ranu Uniyal, Ali Black with Nandini Sahu, and Jaydeep Sarangi with Shane Strange, all arise from such scenarios of collaborative asynchronicity, asymmetry and/or as partial-to-greater degrees of absence. Although these reflect processes very different from those anticipated, they nonetheless bring welcome modes of value and insight to the project as a whole and to the scope for ongoing trans-geographic research through creative arts collaboration broadly.

Hecq, Fraser, and Uniyal each created single-author articles in which they read and responded to their absent partner poet's writings. With an emphasis on notions of *encounter* in both Hecq's and Fraser's separate contributions, these pieces reflect the ways in which both reading and writing can on their own be considered processes always-already entailing intersubjective processes through which self-other boundaries are reconfigured in ways conducive to the generation of knowledges and ways of knowing beyond those previously accessible. As Australian-based researcher Constance Ellwood explains, encounter is a radical mode of '*moving with otherness*' that 'forces us to think creatively and to move beyond the boundaries of our current habituated thought' via 'an openness to the haecceity of the other' (2009: 46). Reading facilitates this style of encounter because it entails opening oneself to the subjective worldview of the writer and the cultural complexities woven through the particular context from which they create. Writing is meanwhile itself sometimes pitched as a kind of unconscious re-reading or re-processing of multiple texts among other cultural artefacts we have previously read, interpreted or engaged with in some way (Disney 2011). When one explicitly reads then writes in response to what one has read, these intersubjective – indeed interliminal – possibilities of reading and writing as modes of encounter and knowledge transformation are multiplied, as reflected in Hecq's article when she writes:

Inspired by Bashabi's nostalgic dialogue with India's psychogeography and history, I set to work, resorting to myth and imaginary projection in order to flesh out my own poems. I delved into the unwritten unknown in an effort to preserve Bashabi's recollections of places dear to her, skimmed over possibilities of filling the gaps in my knowledge and understanding, attentive to details, I espoused her prosody and play in my responses. I expanded upon images or contracted them with irony. I embroidered incipient story lines or pulled out their threads. I stitched ink memorialising the work as though I knew the encounter was to remain imaginary and symbolic.

In Jen Webb's encounter with Bidhu Padhi, similar processes lead to interrogation of the notions of community and connectedness, and thus to deepened insights into the ways we can pursue and maintain these things. The single author article by Ranu Uniyal then probes inequalities of gender and the different-though-connected ways in which patriarchy and cisprivilege manifest across Indian, Australian, and broader international contexts. Gender is likewise of focus for Ali Black, with Nandini Sahu, but with a particular emphasis on the embodied experiences of women working in academia, signalling a pressing need for both systemic and cultural change to education practices around the globe. Then, the final peer-reviewed article by Jaydeep Sarangi, with Shane Strange, re-ignites the focus of earlier pieces in the issue – namely, that of forging links between distant lands via the initiation of 'poetic connections between Kolkata/Jhagaram and Canberra'. This is followed by a non-peer-reviewed interview in which Mohini R Gurav, a Mumbai-based academic specialising in Gender Studies, Indian English Poetry, and Indian Writings in English, enters a dialogue with Australian poet and editor Robert Maddox-Harle about his passion for Indian literature and his work on anthologies that bring Indian and Australian poetic voices together (Maddox-Harle 2013; Maddox-Harle & Sarangi 2020).

Overall, we hope that this special issue may not only offer a range of poetic insights into the similar and different issues and challenges pertinent to the cultures of India and Australia today, but that the issue as a whole may offer a range of examples demonstrating processes of transnational creative arts research collaboration, and the knowledge-generative benefits such processes can potentiate. In finalising and releasing the articles for others to read, we would like to think that our project is not so much ending as opening to new and different ways in which work of this nature might continue unfolding. For instance, it would be interesting to attempt a similar set of collaborations linking poets from different backgrounds and locations beyond just India and Australia. It would be equally interesting to investigate the possibilities of writing and art forms other than poetry and/or of creative exchanges between groups of three or more collaborators. There is certainly much more to share and explore, and we hope that what we present here carves some small inroads towards that future work's becoming thinkable, and possible.

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Dr Amelia Walker is a poet, researcher, and former member of the executive board of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). Since 2018, she has worked on TEXT journal as co-editor of book reviews. She acknowledges that she was born, and lives, on the land of the Kaurna people, as a person of mixed Caucasian descent. Sovereignty was never ceded; this always was, always will be Aboriginal land.