

**Murdoch University**

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**Australia in the Vernacular: Poetic Explorations**

**Declaration of Presentation**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution, including Murdoch.

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## **Abstract**

As Australian society continues to evolve, so is the idea of a collective culture changing in ways that provoke a questioning of traditional values, tropes and symbols. This thesis will explore and analyse some of the changes in the ways poetic art might imagine what Australian identity and culture look like: through a creative component comprising a small collection of my own poetry and a dissertation that offers a reading of a small selection of poems by Australian poet Les Murray. The creative component will seek to capture glimpses of the ordinary aspects of contemporary Australian society, and to show how poetry has the potential to transcend exclusionary viewpoints in order to re-imagine Australian diversity. The dissertation will explore how Murray, who both interpreted and translated familiar images of Australian landscapes, nature, culture, and people, pieces together a mosaic written in the Australian vernacular—for him the key to understanding Australian identity. While Murray's poetry has been criticised for its restrictive views of Australian culture, his harnessing of the vernacular offers the possibility for an expansive poetic rendering of national life in all its difference. Overall, the thesis aims to offer the reader an imaginative series of poetic and critical reflections on elements of Australia's complexity as a changing nation.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Most importantly, I take this opportunity to acknowledge and heartily thank the positive and supportive role that my supervisor Associate Professor Anne Surma played with her guidance and in encouraging me to excel.

Lastly, I celebrate the career of Les A. Murray: his poetry and his sizable contribution to Australian art and culture.

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## Introduction and overview

Les Murray, an internationally recognised and eminent Australian poet, was a driving artistic force in promoting a particular understanding of Australian national identity (Bourke 1992, 3). His work explores notions of nationhood that acknowledge and pay respect to Aboriginal history and the lasting effects of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples (Matthews 2001, 7-13), while at the same time creating a vision for an emerging independent nation that retains the traditions of what it means to be Australian. Today, however, such notions are contested, and ideas about Australian nationhood are also changing. Indeed, as I write this thesis, the Australia Parliament's Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy is underway (2020).<sup>1</sup>

With such processes of change in mind, I address the overall aim of this thesis to explore, through a creative and critical lens, representations of Australian identity, both from a contemporary imaginative perspective, as communicated in a selected collection of my poetry, and through a retrospective view based on a critical reading of a small selection of Les Murray's poetry and essays. Les Murray's poetry is particularly relevant to any considerations of Australian culture, not only because his work was centred on what it means to be Australian, but because he defended Australian traditional values through harnessing classical, gnomic, and local poetic traditions (Sydney Review of Books 2015) over a period of significant social change from 1965-2015, the span of his artistic career. In addition, through my reading of Murray's poetry whose focus ranges across Australia's first white settlement and interaction with the country's original Aboriginal inhabitants to the present, I will also show the effectiveness of his work in identifying and re-imaging impressions of the complex and contested notion of Australian nationhood and the vexed question of what it means to be Australian. Murray was clear in his sense of national identity being inclusive, not polarising, but discussions around culture and identity by their very nature can become exclusionary. As Murray wrote in his essay "The Trade in Images": "You cannot make an image of any large reality such as Australia and do justice to all its aspects" (Murray 1999a, 170). Murray seldom used the term national identity, preferring the term "vernacular republic", which he defined as "that 'folk' Australia, part imaginary and part historical, which is the real matrix of any distinctiveness we possess as a nation, and which stands over against all our establishments and elites" (Parliament of Australia 1996.)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee for the Inquiry will issue its report in September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Kane defines Les Murray's "vernacular republic" as "that intersection of language and value marking the common life of rural people and representing the best hope for a future Australia, a place where democracy is egalitarian and culture is integrated. But for this to happen the urban culture has to be displaced from its dominant position" (Kane 1996, 197).

Murray noted that he preferred the use of vernacular in his poetry because it was “not in political use and thus capable of fresh angles and insights” (Parliament of Australia 1996, 32); and he likened the republic to a work of art: “it has to be unquestionable and not divisive” (1996, 41). Murray wanted his notion of a “vernacular republic”,<sup>3</sup> to be inclusive and “never [to] relegate anyone” (1996, 41). Murray’s sense that the vernacular evades the political and that it is therefore inclusive may be naïve, as current events relating to the global Black Lives Matter movement demonstrate only too painfully. Nonetheless, the context and the spirit of his deployment of the vernacular as poetic vocabulary and device warrant further consideration. I consider these ideas further in the two components that constitute this thesis: a creative anthology comprising of 20 poems and a critical dissertation. I provide a brief overview of each component below.

### *Dissertation*

In the dissertation component of this thesis I show how a mosaic of Murray’s vision of a “vernacular republic”, self-consciously written in everyday language to which he attributes a distinctively Australian register, can be pieced together through a critical reading of selected works from his oeuvre. From his poems and essays I will draw out, in the poet’s use of the Australian vernacular, key ideas that inform his writing, including those relating to egalitarianism, pastoralism, place, as well as Murray’s sense of the intangible qualities of the Australian character such as “sprawl”. Although Murray was critically acclaimed and won many literary awards,<sup>4</sup> he has also attracted criticism for harnessing a predominantly traditional Australian and rural focus in his poetry, rather than taking a more cosmopolitan view of the “vernacular republic” to which some of his peers aspired (O’Connor 1981, 54). Murray’s focus may not cover all viewpoints of his era, but his poetic subjects are nonetheless varied, and his style is certainly original and not amenable to categorisation.

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<sup>3</sup>This term and Murray’s comments were part of a paper “And Let’s Call It The Commonwealth: One Poet’s View of the Republic” presented by him as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 7 June 1996. The inclusive and, in his view, non-political nature of Murray’s term “vernacular republic” lends itself for use as a collective term and for these reasons I will in this dissertation, use it to represent nationhood, national culture and national identity.

<sup>4</sup> For example, 1984—Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry for *The People's Other World*; 1989—Creative Arts Fellowship; 1989—Officer of the Order of Australia for Services to Australian Literature; 1990—Grace Leven Prize for Poetry for *Dog Fox Field*; 1993—Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry for *Translations from the Natural World*; 1995—Petrarca-Preis (Petrarch Prize); 1996. T. S. Eliot Prize for *Subhuman Redneck Poems*; 1997—Rated by the National Trust of Australia as one of the 100 Australian Living Treasures; 1998—Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry; 2001—Shortlisted for the International Griffin Poetry Prize for *Learning Human*; 2002—Shortlisted for the International Griffin Poetry Prize for *Conscious & Verbal*; 2005—Premio Mondello, Italy for *Fredy Neptune*.

## *Creative Work*

The creative component of this thesis seeks to capture a poetic snapshot of ordinary<sup>5</sup> Australian culture and people through a small selection of my own poetry. The poems trace a broad spectrum of mundane themes, subjects, and emotional attitudes, which many readers may recognise. The familiar themes that I seek to render in my poems contain elements of traditional Australian culture<sup>6</sup> but also point to new cultural touchstones that emerge from the many changes that are arising and that have occurred through immigration and social and political change. For example, as ‘new’ Australians seek to embrace Australian culture, their own cultures in turn subtly change the nation, and it is some of these aspects of a changing Australian society that I have included in my poetry.<sup>7</sup> The poems thus represent some of the qualities, both traditional and contemporary, which shape and define images and imaginings of Australia. By providing some more pieces for the mosaic of what it might mean to be Australian and by pointing to different aspects of the imagined “vernacular republic”, my poetry aims to gesture towards what makes Australian culture both complex and distinctive, both collective and contested space. It should be noted that some uses of the vernacular in the poems below, such as those that designate racial or ethnic identity, necessarily call up rather than evade the political. It is in this way that they trouble the idea, or the possibility, of the vernacular as unequivocally inclusive.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “ordinary” as Raymond Williams defines it in his essay “Culture is Ordinary” (1958). Here he explains that “a culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The question I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind” (McGuigan 2014, 93).

<sup>6</sup> I harness terms such as “traditional Australian culture, traditional Australian identity” and “traditional Australian values” alert to the fact that such designation is necessarily generalised, incomplete, and uneven, and that it cannot account for contrasting or contesting perspectives. Nevertheless, such terms do attempt to gesture towards a set of broad, culturally specific attitudes, which, for Murray, could be captured and recognised in poetic form. As mentioned above, I also use Murray coinage: “vernacular republic”.

<sup>7</sup> See also Moran (2005, 8).

## Poems

### The Arrivals

The water roads that led to our shores,  
brought poor unfortunates, Australian royalty.  
Star and crescent cameleers came freely,  
discovering the interior on desert ships.

Chinese pioneered the bush too.

They were there—Eureka!

Nippon knew how to seed.

Crops that were pearlers.

Many a Scottish heather,

and English rose, wilted in the shimmer.

Fooled by the mirage of picket fence,  
only to be fenced in by cast iron surrounds,  
in a lonely field.

Potato famine exports arrived by the shipload.

Anything is better than starving.

From peat bog to Mallee.

Hard yakka and tales of the Fae.

VE day and 'Littleboy' brought waves

of anticipation, from ships' railings.

European toil for wealth, families thrived.



Italians already here searched for payload,  
and they sponsored more, mostly  
southern family and village *paesano*.  
Greek cafés opened, exuding Athenian flavours.  
They followed steel tracks  
from coastal cities to towns.  
Proud traditions with orthodox patriarchy.  
Embracing a young country, building community.

Populate or perish—the thought  
of invasion spurred an invited influx.  
The invaders welcomed the invasion, mostly.  
Post-war baby bloomers boomed.

Now, air arcs through stratosphere,  
our runways beckon.

New arrivals of no fixed DNA,  
post-customs,  
play out multilingual dramas,  
reunited and reinvigorated.

Abundant heritage to deepen the desert pool.

Ways strewn with cast-off baggage:  
deaf and blind memories litter the course.  
Horrific things, unspeakable things, best forgotten.

Images viewed through sun-squinting eyes.

Departures with throat lumps,

that dissolve and then reform in a mind's flash.

Scent that returns from a lost kitchen.

Fragmented thoughts that seek distant landscapes.

The dirt track walked to school

and then home again.

The front door with a sticky lock.

The local worship where once knelt

familiar, well-worn memories, so real.

Dog-eared pictures that weep.

Satellite images that sound so close.

FaceTime that is not tactile:

The joy, excitement, and despair

of longing over distance.

Australia is overflowing with journeys,

having left but not arrived yet.

Fertile destinations in transit.

Seeds planted in new soil—augmented—flourishing, moving.

## The Gee

I.

It's a vortex, the Gee.

Echoes at F1 engine frequency—

race to fading crescendos that rise and fall.

Swirl of boos and ahhs.

Waves that cascade and ride the tiered slopes.

Green carpet that sweats under the noonday sun.

Sweet scent of hops and coconut oil from the deep.

Indian drums that rapture in staccato.

Rhythmic bursts of nerve janglings—or joy?

Conversations on hold till trundlings cease,

and red cherry delivered to leather slap.

Leg swivel for amber cups that pass in quad cradles.

Curried styro with naan lid that tastes of the Punjab.

Distant green-capped manikins that come close

with focal adjustment.

Tricolours of saffron, white and green

wheeled in by dark men in blue,

collected en masse—mingled with boxing marsupials.

Jovial banter returned with yielding willow.

Curry eaters and boing boings:

mutual admiration of good old (post-)colonialism.

A menagerie in harmony.

II.

Union jack in the corner has always seemed right.

But that's a Bradman quote from the past.

Multiculturalism was colonial dualism.

Master and slave, head-hunting—

nothing barmy about the army.

Red-faced arrogant sons of b's.

But we loved to hate them.

It's a test post-Christmas,

attempted convict bashings that turn to ashes.

Ringside seats to a Boxing Day that's traditional.

There is history there in the long room, at the Gee.

Similarly, it's a gentleman's stretch at Lords—

aristocratic beginnings, no doubt.

The replication goes on, still.

III

Greeks on the wing.

Romans on the ball.

Irish in the ruck.

Dutch that take screamers.

Macedonians sneaking goals

Aboriginal magic thru the sticks.

Russians on the fly.

Korean straight through.

Sudanese at half-forward.

What to make of these outrageous claims in the modern game—  
oblong-ball disease that becomes obsessive?

Religious fervour, holding mass on hallowed ground.

Even the non-believers can identify it's ecumenical.

#### IV

It was friendly at the games in the summer of '56.

Golden, they said, for the girls.

Swimming out of the pool, on to the track, and into folklore.

Ceremonial closing without barriers—all marching as one.

Visiting athletes billeted at mum and dad's place.

It was Sunday roast: lamb and veg,

Hand-knitted woolly jumpers and freckled smiles,

all blue-sky summer, beach and optimism

accelerating a birthing of baby boomers.

It's a vortex, the Gee.

Pulling people into one place.

Centred on the challenge.

## Wrongful Dismissal

Every Saturday morning at eleven  
seated in the quiet zone,  
we converse.

Politely at first.

Respectful glances for signs of acknowledgement:

how was your week,  
the job, the family?

Rellies here from Kabul

for six weeks—he says—good.

Smiling, straight white teeth.

Black eyes ablaze.

Thick black hair, bristling.

His lips move, synchro meshed.

Sharp and mellow tones modulate  
tumbling like water over white marble.

He says

I want to be Aussie,

like you ...

I expected this at some stage,

I knew it was coming.

The sounds of the alphabet

and spelling became secondary.

The citizenship test had taken over  
our English lesson lately.

We share a common bond,  
it says in the booklet.

Australia's flags:

The Islanders' flag

The Aboriginal flag

And the national flag.

The coat of arms:

Kangaroo, emu, red lion,

Maltese cross, imperial crown,

a non-existent piping shrike.

And, a black swan.

Government and the law:

Queen of Australia

Prime Minister

Governor General

and Royal assent.

Two governments both with houses,

local shires,

don't forget executive powers.

Australian people:

mateship,

Don Bradman,

Stolen Generations,

Anzac spirit.

Nationhood, Australian identity.

Pretty hard to explain this, really.

We met at the library

many times

Some Saturdays his young daughter

lingered behind the bookshelves

opposite our table, near the

‘no mobile phone’ and ‘wi-fi’ signs.

Sneaking a look at the big Aussie

teaching her papa English.

Isn't it Australian?

It was a pleasure helping Abdul.

He is a lovely man, proud and honest.

He failed the citizenship test, though.

I partly blamed myself,

on behalf of the Australian people.

His English was as good as his iPhone translator,

and phonics was an alien concept.

But he understood—a fair go.

He showed me Dari.



The dots had meaning.

In a right-to-left fashion.

There was no way I could learn that.

I told Abdul about Afghanis

—cameleers,

being some of the first Australian immigrants.

(Well, besides the rest of us)

It made him smile, it did.

He is a lovely man, Abdul.

He said he had work six days a week

Too busy for English and Australian tests.

He declared his innings.

I never saw him again.

I never got to explain

“the Dismissal”.

**Whitewashed**

We stand forever with him on the beach,  
a moment captured and cradled in our spirit.  
O how I long to be there—but for a moment.  
Resting my spirit on grainy dunes.

The white sandy beach that lay forever asleep  
amongst the ebb and flow of tides *ad infinitum*,  
dreaming of barefoot imprints  
and bark canoes beyond the shore.

She waited there patiently for an eternity.  
Witnessing storms that came and went.  
Endless scorching days  
that parched bones to a crumbling dust.

Her arms were wide and welcoming.  
Longing for sons and daughters  
to frolic and fish in her waters,  
and hunt and cook on her shores.

They came from far away,  
following the horizon.  
She beckoned them closer.  
Her message tumbled as notes on the wind.  
Come closer, come closer she sang

a sweet song that spoke of endless life.

Her words were full of understanding.

She offered them all she had to give.

She dreamed of her people.

She loved them—they were her own.

Offering up food and water—in abundance.

Her laws they obeyed and they thrived and multiplied.

The theory went that on balance

a great south land must be there.

The Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish

bumped into pieces on the map.

Not knowing the full circumference.

Not knowing how long they were in the journey.

Fernandez, De Torres, Pelsaert, Dampier and Tasman,

were all setting sail for Southern waters long before Cook.

The ripples of their wake reached many uncharted shores.

Tasman touched our south-island in manic terms.

His nautical skills are legendary.

Abel to navigate uncharted routes to New Holland.

The Lieutenant's instruction to seek the antipodes

was revealed post a Tahitian transit of Venus.

Those sailing men were magnificent without scurvy.

With sextant and later Harrison's tick-tock,  
the Lieutenant endeavoured to chart  
the unknown gaps from the known to the known.

The stench of washed-up rotting seaweed.  
The crunch of sand and shell under boot.  
The sound of gentle waves lapping the shore.

Voices from the mariners in the pinnace,  
not yet over the side, waiting for command.  
Cook's blue blazer iridescent in the morning light.

Wafts of smoke and scent of fire-cooking draw the gaze,  
up the beach, black women and children flee.  
Shouting in shrill tones, evaporating into the bush.

Two black men remain, poised and curious.  
Tall, athletic, imposing with spears raised.  
Courage in the face of the unknown.

The sea carries the ship here—why?  
Different men of an age of reason rowed ashore;  
one clumsy step on terra firma,  
shattered an exquisite existence, forever.  
Discovering a continent that wasn't lost.  
Land already inhabited with sophistication.

Many languages and social complexity.

Mapping territory that already had borders.

Naming places that were sung in mythology.

Not understanding the majestic richness that existed.

Banks recorded new flora and fauna,  
with sample and sketch and ship's log.

Encountering blacks with indistinguishable faces.

The Gweagal people knew they were coming:  
watched them all the way up the coast.

Sail, going up, and coming back like a white sand crab.

Smoky emails that forecast their coming.

Songlines that tell of big ship's arrival and of  
spirit beings that speak in a strange tongue.

Recording firestick and ghost-white faces  
with cave etchings and vanishing oral history.

Discoverers don't say hello  
when setting foot on *terra nullius*.

It's birdshot and scatter the mob.

Cook had a mission, a duty.

Orders to be completed;

but all great leaders have compassion—really?

Cook recognised the Indigenous peoples as people.

Not stealing from them, but trading.

Not wanting bloodshed, but understanding.

First encounters of expert spears

that missed deliberately.

Muscat bird-shot that wasn't meant to injure.

Cultural differences that fell short of protocol.

Misunderstandings that lacked malice, initially.

There are melancholy overtones

that belie a conquering spirit.

Through sadness we experience the loss.

Grieve together through our recognition of ignorance.

An ignorance that caused great nations to be lost,

immeasurable knowledge refused and truth

to fall like crumbled pressings from the whitewashed pages of history.

Cook was a messenger who came from across the sea.

The message could have been delivered by anyone.

They watched the Endeavour, as Cook watched their smoke messages.

For a moment in time one history's gaze

was fixed on another's.

The enlightened message was never a conversation.

Her message still tumbles on the wind.

**Benito Mussolini's *Passeggiata***

It's an avenue now,  
where once a rail  
laddered to town.  
Cut into the hill and  
embanked at a level of repose.  
Straight and narrow gauged;  
mingling white-trunked trees  
crowd the track, closely.  
Where once people herded  
on platforms, to be shaken  
through coal-smoked carriages:  
and seat on hard wooden numbness.  
Through rattling, dusted window panes,  
vistas flicker beyond trees as if a silent movie.  
It's there, it's not, it's there, it's not,  
it's there it's not, it's there—it's gone.  
Clickety clack, clickety clack, clickety clack.  
Here and there—sparse breaks  
open to views of the city totems.  
Sand-slipped steel wheels  
screech on a swaying incline as the  
gaping red Glaswegian ironhorse,

puffs and belches brown  
pillowing smoke, pierced  
with squirts of steam,  
that swirl and waft past.

...

Fossilised lumpy remains can still be found  
scattered randomly beside the now bare track.

Rusted, eroded remnants  
of railway dogs  
spike the broken ramparts,  
sleepers of a bygone era.

...

I meet my Italian friend  
walking down the track,  
now and again.

Walking the track to town.

Always mornings—never late.

We walk and talk,  
sometimes briefly  
—usually for hours.

Seamless conversation flows—  
frequently stopping to listen with  
heads cocked and eyes locked,  
then, slow steps, in a synchronised waltz.



He has aged since I first said *buongiorno*,

but then so have I.

He is now an old man:

age and toil have not faded his smile.

I see him from a long way off.

His gait steady but slow,

his bald head topped with a towelling bucket.

He knows most who traverses the

route, it's his social outing, his way.

His speech is still punctuated with chopped

words and hands that orchestrate

with southern dialect and subtleties.

He talks of family, reminisces of his home

in Italy.

He went back once, he said,

that was enough; it's better here, he reckons.

The pension is plenty.

We disagree about politics, the government—

with the greatest respect, of course.

Sometimes he speaks of the war.

The blackshirts and the Nazi occupation.

But mostly of his village

in the shadows of Vesuvius.

The traditions of his church and his people.

Family Sunday lunch after church.

The strict rules of dating with a chaperone.

Life was simple then, he reckons.

Food and wine were the joys of life.

His love and respect for his *nonno e nonna*.

In the village everyone knows everyone, he told me.

Your word was everything.

Honour was life or death

How odd.

He never mentioned Mussolini.

**our man on the spot: interior monologue from myk corona**

initially i thought it was overplayed flu-like symptoms well it's the flu really isn't it it can't be that bad a bit like sars i read the other day this professor guy said sars died out something about the virus that it didn't like the heat or humidity and sunlight uv that is it just died out in the northern hemisphere summer gone and never to return but now i'm not so sure it was bad in china how did they get it under control so quick like i find that a bit hard to believe i don't trust their figures data that is and italy well it's a bloody catastrophe there it's their attitude to life domani kiss hug touch they just can't help it it's how they communicate plus there are lots of old people there you know their population birth rate is one point seven something like they are breeding themselves into extinction well i suppose australians aren't much different well i can't talk as i never had any kids one of those things that you just accept and get on with life i think this lock down business won't work longterm you can't lock people up for months they have to live people will go stir crazy lots of psychological damage and domestic violence well more than usual i reckon the drug overdoses will skyrocket even the wine is selling out at the liquor store no wine casks in sight we are all addicted to excess i guess just can't ever get enough more is better and pleasure is king or queen reminds me of the panic with the aids epidemic that wasn't a pandemic like this one but it scared the crap out of everyone well those who were promiscuous and look how it stopped people being sexually active not i reckon this flu you know virus thing will go the same way the ads on tv and in the paper scares everyone then it becomes a memory still i wouldn't like to catch it even though i have had the flu vacc and the pneumonia vacc and wash my hands drowning in your own bodies immune reaction would be a terrible way to go i think i am staying home for a few weeks well at least a month can't be that bad though surely the stock market crash is real though i'm too nervous to check my super still we are all in the same boat can't believe those cruise liners just showing up out of the blue like that love boat i don't think so turn them around and send them away i say although they are just people i suppose passengers giving us the bird the cheek so ungrateful still i'm alright for a few weeks home or months plenty of toilet rolls

## **The Syllabus of Puddle Skimming**

It's quick and easy Tapengo

Don't blink, don't think, too deeply

Google translates us stupidly.

## **Tankman**

Tankman was a student in June eighty-nine.

He was an unknown protestor.

A Tian-an-men Square social reformer

and shopping-bag tank stopper.

The Forbidden City held no fear

in the People's republic of amnesia.

At that moment their hearts were torn:

no apology—no remorse—no regrets.

Officials massacred the minds of

sufferers of the Tien-an-men myth.

The enforced forgetting had begun.

The fear and trembling reverberate forthwith:

Our trading eyes on their totalitarian politics with

Spratly reminders of deals in our backyard island.

## **My Grandmother's Little Red Brick House**

My Grandmother's

little red brick house had

straight white tuck points.

High galvanised iron roof sheeting that capped bull

nosed cool verandahs, shading summer play.

Slippery wide jarrah floorboards scattered

with rugs that were disciplined outside.

Coal hearth mantle clock

that whispered tick-tock in the night.

Kookaburra town-gas cooker baked

risen sponge cakes lighter than air.

Wrap around frugal home stitched floral dresses

with apron pockets full of wooden pegs.

Chewing the fat with the neighbour

with eyes for early childcare centres.

The corner-shop conversations

following Turf cork-tipped withdrawals.

Cold-seated cast iron bath tubs

that caused a cheeky grimace.

Thunder in a box up the back fence that

echoed deep thoughts in the little house.

Coal smoke reminiscence that smelt

of choo-choos shunting past.

Nightmares of all quiet on the western front

whose memories were swept under skirting boards.

Sadness of the Depression, washed in the laundry

and sanitised in the copper.

Joking and laughter around tea leaf readings

predicting backyard weddings in black and white.

Early morning toast-and-jam rituals, whose compassionate

crumbs were collected and shared with generations.

Loving arms that embraced traditions

of whiskers and warm kisses.

Identity hatched in the henhouse

and grown in the veggie patch.

## Shopping by trolley

It is a bit of an artform to  
dodge and weave.

Knowing when to be there and when  
to dis\_ \_ \_ear.

Knowing who to trust and who  
to fEAR.

Outlines of faces sketched and incomplete:  
shades of experience reveal  
the form.

Living rough;  
in the beginning it's not really  
a choice.

Circumstances feed a need  
to survive.

Living on the fringe has  
its risks.

You can get bashed, robbed,  
or raped.

If the grog doesn't get you or  
the meth hasn't killed you  
it's still a KY slide.

The descent can be gradual.

But it's all the same at the bottom,  
it's all sides steep—smooth—slippery  
and up.

Daylight switches off memories of past  
mistakes.

But in the city twilight,  
the night's restless damp blanket,  
grow nightmares that thrash and whip  
and writhe.

If you learn the ways of the streets  
and survive.

You begin to lose hope and  
your pride.

Family no longer knows you:  
given you up.

You look and smell  
like homelessness.

You notice the scant regard but don't  
really care.

Outdoors is freedom not walls of  
mental squeeze.

Salvos for a shower, a feed, or a warm bed



on a freezing night.

But it's better in the favourite hideout on

the Terrace—

leaf-screened corner—cardboard ceiling under the city's

hum and glow.

Shopadocket by selection is the go.

Receipted evidence in shiny caged chariots.

Searching carpark in thongs that stick on hot tar:

pulled bungs.

Tallies not too long and inclusive

of your needs.

Same day, same store, in case

you're asked.

Wander the aisles, match the items,

out the entrance.

Trolley shopping's a joy, it's free:

it's a necessity.

Homelessness can be desperate or a warm

embrace.

Comfort in knowing that tomorrow is the same

as today.

Desperate in that deep down you want

to change.

We have all been there:

It's being human.

You want to respect yourself;

maybe tomorrow.

You want a smile in recognition of yourself;

that's rare.

Today has the same reasons as yesterday

for change.

But that was five years ago,

and you feel your strength sapped.

You want to find a way out;

you're lost.

I knew a person once like this;

it's possible.

## Notes from a Drug Rehab Vollie

### *The Needs*

It's all mind games and I want.

I need to go down to the servo to get smokes.

That can't be a big ask.

Why not, I'm OK to go on my own.

*You're slurring your words and you can't walk straight.*

Ah for fuck's sake.

I need to go to Centrelink to get my money:

I can't wait until tomorrow.

That can't be a big ask, surely.

I need my meds.

Well how long till I can have them.

I can't wait that long:

I want my evening meds now instead.

That can't be a big ask.

*You can only have what the doctor prescribes.*

Ah for fuck's sake

I need it, I want it, now.

(Addiction makes you self-centred)

*ATM— At the Moment*

I just got outa jail.

Yeah lobbed straight here.

Picked up the habit inside, you know.

In the can for armed robbery.

Drove a car through the shopping centre—ATM

Thinkin' of my wife and daughter.

Need my wife back.

My daughter is my life.

Need my life back.

I'm sick of the crap.

I'm sick 'n' tired of being sick 'n' tired.

I need to do this rehab.... Big time.

He needs help—ATM

*The Con*

You goin' down the shop, bro?

*Could be*

Into Subiaco, bro?

*Yeah, could be*

Can you get me a whopper, bro?

*Yeah, could do*

Use my card bro, that's the pin.

*Is that all you want?*

Yeah, and a spearmint milkshake bro, ta

...That's fifteen eighty, next window

Visa card, mate...PIN

Declined.

(Addicts can be untrustworthy)

*The Fix*

When driving to Northbridge police station,

he opens up.

The house was all open, mate.

I was high, just walking around the streets looking.

Went straight in, no one there.

Just wandered around inside,

jewellery on the table:

grabbed it and ran.

Got two hundred for it, which bought a fix.

How did I know it was worth thirty-two thousand?

Park just here mate, out the front of the cop shop.

I need to report on bail.

If I'm not back in thirty you know what's happened

(Addicts will do what's required to get a fix)

*It's a Shame*

How did you know how the brain receptors work?

Oh ... you're a doctor.

You have four clinics interstate?

How the heck did you end up here?

You must have known what would happen.

Deregistered?

Your father runs the business now?

Do you think they will re-admit you?

I could tell you were educated—talking before.

A long way to fall.

Only one way and that's up, for sure.

Don't feel bad, it's just one mistake

We all make them.

Shame. Shame. Shame.

(Addicts have shame which can destroy them)

*It's a miracle*

I was there when she first came in.

It was afternoon shift at the end of a hot day.

Wednesdays are implant days—Naltrexone implants.

And she had just been treated.

She was thin, emaciated and sick,

teeth missing and sores on her face.

Living on the streets had not been kind.  
Never enough money for rent:  
buy drugs first, which is most of it,  
food second, then live under the stars.  
Centrelink benefits only go so far.  
The first night in detox is always the worst,  
and she didn't disappoint us.  
It's always a sleepless night  
and most haven't slept for days.  
Scared shitless of going without:  
some go uptown the day of the implant.  
That always makes for an eventful evening.  
The abuse, the threats of violence.  
All part of a lively Wednesday night  
She, Kimbo I will call her,  
was in a bad way.  
She told me if she didn't kick it,  
she knew she would die.  
Her detox was worse than most:  
Blood-curdling nightmares and screams.  
I was once told by an addict  
that everything inside hurts to max10.  
Kimbo was determined,  
as her life depended on giving up.

She stayed with us for 6 weeks.

The change was slow:

the body heals, but the mind takes much longer,

if ever.

She looked healthier when she left

for a half-way house,

her smile was returning.

Kimbo was to do the rounds three times.

Three torturous detoxes,

three goes at it.

I got to know her well

and I wanted to help her.

There was something about her—special,

it certainly wasn't her looks—

it was her soul, her smile.

She referred to me as 'mother fucker'.

Affectionately, of course, most times.

I met her mum and dad:

salt of the earth people, just like Kimbo.

It took her twelve months,

but she made it clean.

The change is truly remarkable.

She knows it's never over, though—

it's a lifelong struggle, still.



I met her on return trips to the clinic.

She then called me Magic Mike.

It's better than mother fucker.

They help themselves.

It's an horrific journey.

Full of their courage.

But for a vullie,

the hug of thanks, makes it worth it.

It was a miracle.

(Magic happens)

## The Contortionists of a New World Order

Are we the keepers of conspiracies—  
the unwitting manipulated fodder of the conspirators?

The Fakebook truth-sayers,  
and Instagroup integrators of half-truths.

Perhaps the Twitter feeders of  
bird-brained feelings of unreasoned insults.

The background white noise, static  
is always there trying to infiltrate.

Looking to upset our applecarts and split our pips.

Offending us with differing opinions  
that spit the dummies of our rage,  
and shred our peace into pieces of anxiety.

There is so much truth on offer,  
which one is really the truth?

There is so much fake news,  
which one is really fake?

There is so much hypocrisy we begin not to blink at algorithms  
which seek our purpose—for their mendacity.

Have we been delivered a pivotal moment,

a fork in the road, a line in our sand?

As the feverish tide recedes,

what do we make of the jagged garbage

that is revealed and exposed: our vulnerability

beyond the flattened curve of our viral excess?

An oracle once decreed: never waste a crisis.

The Fibonacci sequences our numbers

should we err at the ebb of our fortunes,

whose luck may run through our fingers.

Is it possible to change course and pivot,

on the frozen predictions of our maiden voyage?

Many blood-red poppies grow on Flanders

fields and in cold, ancient, religious deserts,

each a red flag that signals the cost of freedom.

A freedom that trumpets the glorious tones of our arrival,

but also warns of the stampeding hooves

of the galloping consumption of excess without ideals.

## Invisible Signs

*Dedicated to Tracker Alexander Riley (1884–1970)*

The dust that settles in the night, soft  
hollows in prints that reveal direction and flight.

Hair grabs caught in barked crevasses.

Spilt pebbles on rocky outcrops display different hues.

Bent twigs pointing the way past thousands  
of signposts unheralded by sightless uninitiated ones.

...

Water course on the wing higher up,  
clear of designated territories—legitimate in bird laws.

Crooked neck with ear to the ground listening  
for signs of life underground that sustains.

Magpie swoop attack that instils fear,  
belies recognition of friends who pass in harmony.

...

Diplomats of feather and skin, who  
trod softly between their past and present.

...

Unimaginings deduced from afar, performances of luminous sagacity—

detective work of such minute accuracies and observations.

Navigating paths through traditional scapes,  
reading the land and the lay of a white cold slant.

Tracks, prints, scratchings that evince a craft—  
a language punctuated by scant scats.

...

Luminous eyes are warm with a friendship of place—  
recognition of a spiritual partnership created in millennia's vapour.

A powerful life force of human being with nature,  
entwined in knowledge—a penetration of understanding.

Harmony beyond beginnings and past the present,  
caught in imaginings and wisps of unmatched perfection.

## **Sirens of Change**

*Inspired by the painting "Ulysses and the Sirens" (John William Waterhouse 1891)*

Change is a song that lures us near

Tempting our curiosity of what sounds real

It is urgent, imminent and clear

A noise of logic and fervent ideals

Change is a wind that you only see

when it moves things.

And only feel it

in ways that touch you.

Change can be a car crash

hitting a brick wall at a hundred clicks

or mercury riverlets flowing

to another level.

Change can be tempting

singing like a siren's song

or terrifying

as a bayonet.

There is no force on earth

that can resist it or

equations that can solve it.

Chronology in motion.

**Ethnic Bias Test**

When did you last draw breath?

And deny it's racism?

## The Sultans of the Subalterns

### i. Mesmerised

It's a rotating twenty-four-hour news cycle.

It's all there, regurgitated, exaggerated.

Launder the truth, spin the political angle

and hang the news and the victims out to dry.

By the next morning, it's someone else's turn

on the Hills hoist, wind-dried tissue-thin stories.

Pens of the press came in fourth behind

truth, justice and a lost estate.

Breaking news became creating news

as constructive questions became gotcha bait.

### ii. Drip-feeding veggies

We were lured with Tet's offensive flicks in '68.

It was the beginning of a long shocking love affair.

Maintaining the rage became a catch-cry

of the lounge-room warriors and screen screamers.

We were all mad as hell but we kept taking our medicine.

Ropa-doped and mesmerised,

we thought we had the power.

Fast forward on the VCR found a sticky web,

a net that entrapped all who entered the sphere.



A virtual echo chamber of rage and deception.

Feeding the chooks never was so easy.

iii. The Sultans of the Subalterns

Go big or go home conglomerates reiterated.

But what gives with the worthless,

the politically inane and innate stateless subalterns.

Will they ever sing a chorus?

Rise up the Sultans with Mahatma sandals.

There is revolutionary power in the transient masses:

the have-nothings have nothing and nothing to lose.

Such freedom is never a reportable offence.

Even the silent majority might join in a verse:

a voice of humanity, a song for the ages.

Now wouldn't that be something outrageous?

## Castle Logic

What to make of all this, then?

Is this going to work for real this time?

Shall we do this good thing?—

or will we slip back

to our previous state of apathy

oblivious to the world beyond our castle?

It's a bit like going to church

and praying for help

but not believing there is a God.

All you get is sore knees.

Faking it.

We can save the planet

—just need to halve consumer greed

—fat chance.

We were all destined to die

of carbon dioxide poisoning anyway,

floating on our rafts on rising seas

Now it's ok though, isn't it?

We can all breathe clean air again,

at a social distance,

with a sigh of relief.

It's funny how that works.

You face impending doom  
and when it doesn't happen  
the sun comes out again,  
and you contract amnesia.

We still have the financial crisis  
that's looming as an election issue.

Do we all take a haircut,  
drive one Holden and live in one weatherboard house?

Be 10 pounds overweight not 20?

Smile, say G'day and be polite to people.

Appreciate what we have  
or just go back to the way we were.

Covid-19 is a bit of a black swan really.

A disruptor.

Couldn't have come at a better time.

Even though it snuck up on us.

But will it be worth it in the end?

Just imagine how much we might change

Australia for the better,

if we could all agree

on a common cause.

Instead of settling for cheap takeaways  
courtesy of Uber.

## Scarred for Life

The narrow road serpents up the hill,  
curling between overhanging trees  
that shade the way in summer and  
distribute cold water drops, to  
shock, then drizzle down your back when it rains.

The narrow road on which for a lifetime he walked  
many trips—uphill, then along and beside  
the disused railway track, into town.

Half way up the hill by the edge of the steep  
incline that rose out of a gully in the road,  
towers a gnarly old tree.

The tree stands on its own in a small  
clearing, its trunk is long and thick,  
slightly angled so it leans out over the road.

Its ancient grey crown of branches finger the air,  
shot here and there with green bleeds of new gum leaves.

Pink and Greys in late winter, frolic  
and clown in its foliage in trapeze antics.

When serious, renovating a wind-snapped trunk hollow  
that for eons had borne feather-down squawking chicks.

Black lizards climb upward in hunt for white-wood eating

morsels, that build mud brick air  
castles in rotting trunk crevasses.

This old timer is a living natural history,  
a Wandoo wonderland of totem heritage.

He knew the meaning, but many passers-  
by did not notice the vertical trunk marking.

A worn tired vertical smile that had gaped at passing  
foragers for two centuries, even before the road.

A grey scar that was weathered and smooth with  
rounded white-bark flesh that reclaimed its edges.

Leaf shaped and as tall as eyebrows,  
by now slouched half way up the trunk.

Sometimes on a lazy Sunday afternoon  
he would stop and gaze contemplating the scene.

Forming images of Aboriginal men cutting out bark  
from the young sapped trunk.

Peeling it back and shaping  
it to a curved radial use—sun dried.

In his dreamtimes of imagination, he hears them  
conversing, laughing perhaps late into the  
afternoon when bouncing greys go down to drink  
at the creek, and the smoke begins to swirl up to them  
from beyond the granite outcrop where the creek winds  
down to the flat land below, and family.

He never knew them but he feels their presence.

He has never seen them but he imagines their faces.

He has never touched them but

he can feel their black skin

and he can smell their sweat.

He sees them in his reflection

in the rock pool at the outcrop.

Their blood runs through him.

When at work or in a crowd—

strangely at unexpected times,

he can smell the rising smoke

and hear their voices chant.

Their images flood in on him,

and once again he is with them.

**Durba Gorge**

*Inspired by “Durba Gorge” a painting by Rover Thomas (1926–1998)*

Who are you Rover Thomas, Joolama?

I look at your painting and wonder what  
you were thinking when you created Durba Gorge.

I have met your people, Joolama, your skin;  
your family, but never knew them.

I am distant, removed and full of no understanding.

I see with no eyes of dreaming.

I do not absorb your Jukurrpa;  
your spirit of the land into the dreaming.

Like a stream that flows into the desert,  
the red gorge and into the waterhole.

Wungurr the rainbow serpent enriches your land.

I know your story, Rover Thomas—

horseman, stockman and artist.

You worked for your living—droving cattle, fixing fences,

You roved around the Kimberley and Territory,  
even New York, everywhere!

You knew horses.

The smell of lathered sweat that  
soaped horse flanks white; the

musky smell that filled your nostrils.

The horse-wet muzzle that wiped your neck

warm, soft with whiskery touch.

The gentle nudge that pushed you off balance—

trusting each other as you rode as one.

Your horse took you many places

outside your Warman homeland and your desert birthplace

to far beyond your horizon. You saw many different *skins*

and knew their spiritual places and ways which you painted.

You travelled more than your desert people could dream.

You saw crocodile, water snake and mud crabs

and the big sea beyond the dry hot land of your desert homeland.

The horse also carried the white man invader.

They came swift with a brutal retribution;

justice from the barrel of their gun.

There was no law.

Your elders told of many massacres of your people:

Texas Station massacre and Bedford Downs massacre

where your starving families were fed

Strychnine-laced food—leaving them writhing in pain.

They died slow, all finished with a bullet to the head

except one who hid in a dead steer carcass.

He survived and ran away to tell the story.



All for killing white man's cattle.

How could you understand our senseless brutality?

We stole your land, took away your children,

raped your women and stole your babies.

We murdered your people.

Could you forgive us, Rover?

You told us this is your land and you are from Wangkajunga people.

Your name is Joolama—you see your land's beauty

and know your dreamtime stories.

What were you thinking, Rover Thomas?

When you sat in the cool shade

under a white gum tree, painting Durba Gorge?

These white dots you mark there on the surface;

I can see—they are white gum tree trunks,

which shine in the moonlight.

The earth you paint, it glows

deep red and orange in the sunlight,

in the shade of the rugged gorge.

I see from above in your painting.

Water-streaked rock walls rising up

from the cool rock pool,

reflecting blue sky, white trunks and green leaves.

I've been there too.

Sandy-dry river bed with leafy trees that hide the entrance  
to the rock pool gorge where life surges;  
when knock 'em-down rains come.

Shrimps hatch, swim fast and die quick—good tucka.

Dinner-plate turtle paddles in flows of a raging creek  
drains to red-flat dirt

when the water dries up—he is gone, he hides  
away in a water cave underground,  
the goanna can't find him.

Bush flies buzz around, on my face and up my nose.

The sun's torch shines hot and gives life.

The red ochre dirt that sticks  
to my feet and to hot moist skin.

White cockatoos screech and quarrel,  
high up in the swaying trees.

Their roots cling to a river flowing underground.

I can see goanna on the rock ledge,  
over there, native bees hover motionless over water,  
while zebra finches with orange plunging beaks,  
at the waterhole's edge, black and white-feathered tails  
are motionless—then gone in a flash.

The wallaby lies in the trees' shade.

Soft eyelashes still, black fur flanks smooth,

erect ears atop black eyes that watch me.

Lungkata, blue-tongued lizard is asleep under a rock;

I see his tail in the shadows—he knows I'm here.

I imagine sitting there with you Joolama, Rover Thomas.

The heat from the desert wind blows

hot and dry on my face.

It sucks the moisture from my eyes and I blink.

The flies incessant, thick, stick,

in the corners of my eyes. Your voice

hums a rhythm, as you tell your story.

Ending each sentence with a white dot on your canvas.

I find myself drawn to you:

I search the lines on your dark

wrinkled brow, your broad nose and white curly hair.

Your black eyes don't look at me

but focus on the end of your thick

brush, drawing my gaze to the canvas.

I watch your eyes lift slightly to settle on a rock

ledge in front of us, my head turns too to look:

a python, banded brown and white.

Its black forked tongue tasting our senses and shape.

Is it a just a serpent, Joolama?

Your ancestors surround me.

Here is a peace, a timeless peace.

Rover's skin smells of the earth,

the earth that begins to absorb me

as I breathe in the soft familiar scent of the eucalypts.

I feel released, at ease and begin to sense this land, Rover's land.

## Made in Australia

It is possible that hyper  
ventilating up Kosciuszko  
I have neglected to pay tribute  
to the cow farm aristocracy.

I refer to the Boeotian benefactor.

He was not alone in his pursuit of pastoral glory.  
Many rode before him in a *Bulletin* story,  
of a drover's wife and the overflow of Clancy,  
of a sentimental bloke that took Doreen's fancy.

We know a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains,  
where the rhyme and rhythm of a horse,  
are matched by droughts, flooding rains,  
and the raging torrents of a water course.

When the bush met Sydney  
and the cow herder became legit.

The self-confessed sub-human redneck  
joined the people's otherworld and became elite.

There was something about his verse  
that was not low order nor high-brow.

But it was a voice that echoed ordinary folk,  
an Australian vernacular, a bridge from then to now.

True to his makings and bush culture,  
Bunyah was his country and his place.  
There were no airs, nor graces,  
no excusing the wide-open cowyard gate.  
The cows meandered up to greet him  
and he milked them with the love of a farmer  
for his poesy, that no poet could repudiate.

When the wave of cultural cringe subsided  
and being Australian became true blue again.  
When his oeuvre and reputation kept growing,  
the bardic bush poet had an Athenian refrain.  
Critical peers chucked it in, became mute, derided,  
as local and international awards began flowing

There's something of the quality of sprawl about Les—  
a big man, perhaps taller when prone,  
with one foot up on the rail of possibility,  
the roughly Christian all Australian,  
that keeps on giving long after and beyond.  
Like Amanda's painting, his small metal boat  
comes home and floats into poetic history—  
for he loved Australia the largest of all his poems.

## **Dissertation**

### **1. Notions of nationhood and Australian identity**

Any notion of a “vernacular republic” for a nation state such as Australia is necessarily contested, and always under review and in process. I begin this section with an acknowledgment that the recognition of “a First Nations constitutional voice” (University of Melbourne 2017) is still outstanding, given the Australian Government’s refusal to respond in any substantive way to the Uluru Statement from the Heart (The Uluru Statement 2017). Genevieve Lloyd in her recent submission to Australia Parliament’s enquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy (2020) suggested that endorsement of The Uluru Statement from the Heart “could point the way to clearer understanding of Australia’s ‘multiculturalism’ in a contemporary context” and in the process become a unifying exercise (Lloyd 2020).

Murray argued in his 1980 essay “The Boeotian Strain” that countries of the New World, such as Australia, have a period of opportunity, a “period of distinctiveness”, to provide a foundation for its people’s essential qualities when it forms the cultural basis and traditions for its civilisation. For Murray, this was “a distinctive rurally based popular tradition” (1980, 55). Australia is a nation that still recognises the head of state of another country as its own, which indicates that although having an evolving coherent cultural basis for nationhood, as yet doesn’t fully acknowledge its own foundations in the lands of Aboriginal peoples. While recognising that notions of identity vary within and between communities in Australia, it is largely Murray’s notion of the “vernacular republic” as captured by the poetic and visionary possibility of a common set of values that is being explored here through a critical reading of selections from his poetry. In this and the following section I focus on the broader notions of the vernacular republic in relation to the Australia nation, notions of identity, and Murray’s poetic voice and cultural focus. In sections three and four I reflect more specifically on the vernacular as Murray’s rendering of a distinctive poetic idiom.

Multicultural sources are changing the idea of what it is to be Australian in any collective and inclusive sense, which Murray imagined should be unquestionable and not divisive. There is more to a “vernacular republic” than just symbolism, however, cultural values are normalised or identified as common values through rituals, cultural and political heritage, stories of prominent Australians, historic events and traditions. For example, in the dominant political imaginary, Australians come to know themselves also through such national events as Anzac Day and Australia Day, when Australian cultural values are held up as the norm. (Offord,

Kerruish, and Garbutt 2001, 1-2). With this in mind, a tension does exist between views of Aboriginal moral ownership of their land, Australian heritage predominantly based on the traditionalists' privileging of the country's historical ties with the United Kingdom, the effects of change brought about by the arrival of immigrants which has been occurring since early white settlement, and more recently, a desire amongst liberal thinking republicans to advance a "vernacular republic" to a more cosmopolitan idea of nationhood.

Murray expresses his own ambivalence about challenges to traditional privileges as he saw it in the late 1990s, in his essay "A Nation of Immigrants" (Murray 1999a). Here he categorically asserts that he is not an immigrant: "not me I was born here", classifying himself as "a single passport white Australian" (1999a, 132). Murray is distinguishing himself from "new" Australians, claiming traditional ownership of land based on his family's settler farming heritage in Bunyah, New South Wales. Murray viewed the traditional land claims of Aboriginals as similar to his own possession of the land, in the mind, affirming: "some of us do possess the land imaginatively in very much the Aboriginal way" (Murray 1984a, 27). Apart from this, Murray recognised the Aboriginal culture as being the senior culture, asserting that "Aboriginal history is poetic, a matter of significant moments rather than of development", preferring to avoid relegation of other cultures (1984, 27). Murray's understanding of nationhood and connection to the land run through his poetry, even if sometimes, despite the potentially expansive, if contested, notion of a "vernacular republic", they rest on somewhat romanticised traditional foundations (Kane 1996, 185).

Examples of the tropes and symbols of a traditional "vernacular republic" such as the "Anzac spirit", "a fair go", notions of "mateship", the Australian bush, footy and the Melbourne Cup, which may be romanticised and rendered as stereotypes, also contain at times qualities that can defy description but can be pointed to as examples of what it means to be Australian (Phillips, Smith 2000, 215-8). In his poem "Visiting Anzac in the Year of Metrication" (2018, 119), Murray extols some of the traditionally masculine characteristics<sup>8</sup> that symbolise a "vernacular republic", as the poetic voice talks back to the Anzacs on the beaches of Gallipoli, securing an emotional bond with the past and evoking a vernacular national imagery:

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<sup>8</sup> The subjects and themes in Murray's poetry are mostly written from a masculine perspective. This perspective is contingent on historical and cultural factors that seek to entrench masculinity as dominant, a position under ongoing challenge. Any notions of Murray's "vernacular republic" must take into account the historically changing roles of gender in culture (Murrie 1998).



Things sticking out jag at the mind,  
 Tooths' bottles, messtins, vertebrae  
 laid down in the bonzer *stoushing* days  
 the *spirited* and *clean-cut* days (13-16; italics in original).

The “jag at the mind” reminds us never to forget the Gallipoli story. Reference to “Tooths’ bottles, messtins, vertebrae” lays out the price the soldiers paid and the debt Australians owe to them. Through use of colloquialisms, as in “bonzer *stoushing* days”, the poetic persona uses the vernacular ironically, to draw the mind back to a bygone era. Mention of “the clean-cut days”, invites the reader to imagine a past that was somehow, it is suggested, better and more upright, and for which the poetic persona has great reverence and respect. The next four lines describe the masculinity of Murray’s notions of war:

Up where the laddering trenches clung  
 and gravel flew in hobnailed sprays  
 where ripped and screaming chaps found out  
 that fellow humans really would (17-20).

These images reflect the brutality men face in war, while the voice of anti-authoritarianism pierce the lines:

The misemployed, underdone by courage,  
 have become the Unsaluting Army... (44-45).

As if in honour of their larrikin<sup>9</sup> colonial attitudes, the “Unsaluting Army” is capitalised to underscore its importance. From the past Murray draws the cultural elements that he sees as crucial to piecing together the image of an Australian cultural ethos.

However, immigration in Australia following the second world war has ensured that such traditional values now form part of a far more diverse cultural complexion in Australian society. This changing perception of our national image is reflected in some of the submissions

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<sup>9</sup> “Larrikin”, an Australian term, “originally always male, was a figure of the slums, tough, breezy, street-wise, not exactly a criminal but acquainted with crime, not exactly a hoodlum either but having some of the same menacing dash” (Murray 1999b, 149).

to the current Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy (Parliament of Australia 2020). Many of the submissions that address the question of Australian identity call for an ongoing recognition of multicultural identities, rather than one homogenous Australian identity obtained through assimilation. For example, Janet McCalman (2020, 3) directly refers to a “triune nation”, a vision of nationhood that was first proposed by lawyer, academic and activist Noel Pearson (Pearson 2014, 51-5). McCalman describes the “triune as three great streams of historical tradition”: Indigenous knowledge and culture, British traditions, and multiple traditions of the many cultures who have settled in Australia since 1788. The three streams are combined in national identity that “is embodied in the values that underpin our institutions” (2020, 93). Murray also imagined a triune concept of national identity with Indigenous people having the senior culture, and rural and urban cultures respectively making up the whole identity. (Murray 1984a, 24) Murray’s triune vision, though, is different from Pearson’s in that Murray prefers a fusion of cultures, which he thought would not be socially polarising, rather than a combination of three distinct cultural identities.

These views of Murray’s concerning Indigenous rights is perhaps at odds with a more contemporary view, which is outlined in Lloyd’s submission (2020) to the Parliamentary Inquiry. In her submission, Lloyd urges consideration that “current conceptualising of Australian ‘multiculturalism’ reflects an inappropriate implicit privileging of some ‘identities’ over others” (2020, 2). Lloyd’s submission seeks to promote recognition of the richness and complexity of Aboriginal heritage in a “re-imagining of Australian Indigenous presence” and a “voice” in the constitution and in treaties that seek reconciliation with the truth of the past. Such sentiments resonate with Murray’s own thoughts but differ in terms of Lloyd’s focus on practical and constitutional recognition. This demonstrates a shift in notions about national identity since the period in which Murray wrote his poetry.

As though in affirmation of enduring notions of national identity, Murray retained rural themes in his poetry, whose distinctive lexical qualities and use of metaphor are, on occasion, reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s concept of “imagism”<sup>10</sup> (Bourke 1992, 44). Economic word usage and the juxtaposition of contrasting imagery used to evoke emotion or produce meaning is often, in Murray’s work, either cryptic or suggestive of a riddle. An example of this is seen in his poem “The Fair Go” (Murray 2018, 534):

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<sup>10</sup> “Imagism” (McGuinness 2006, 183-188).

The ginger-biscuit kelpie dog,  
 young, abandoned off the highway  
 up a gravel road. Livestock  
 and rifle country, so the big  
 harp of ribs in its mouth  
 as its start in life is  
 butcher-cut. To prove innocence.

Here Murray's staccato rhythms create contrasting images of the kelpie dog abandoned and then rescued, which evoke feelings of sense of fair play and empathy in the reader. The question provoked by the last line: why "butcher cut. To prove innocence" is perhaps answered in the poem's title, "Fair Go": the dog is given not only a new start in life, but "butcher cut": generously special. These characteristics of fair play and empathy for others; a "fair go", are key elements of Murray's "vernacular republic" and the ordinary aspects of Australian life that were, for him, nationally distinctive (Matthews 2001, 156).

Les Murray descended from a family of Scottish settlers who arrived in 1848 and who settled on the land in his hometown of Bunyah in NSW. Murray draws on his Celtic pioneering heritage and, as the following poem shows, is resistant to modern ways. In his pastoral poem "Noonday Axeman" (2018, 3) he reminisces and, for a moment, he is part of his imagined country and not the twentieth century. Murray juxtaposes his Bunyah homeland with acknowledgement of the contemporary urban society bordering the place he now lives:

Two miles from here, it is the twentieth century:  
 cars on the bitumen, powerlines vaulting the farms (2-3).

Situating the poetic voice in the "twentieth century" but with a romantic reminiscence of things from the past, the first-person poetic voice recalls:

Here I remember all of a hundred years:  
 candleflame, still night, frost and cattle bells,  
 the draywheels' silence final in our ears,  
 and the first red cattle spreading through the hills.

and my great-great grandfather here with his first sons... (9-13).

Murray imaginatively straddles his traditional heritage and his contemporary world. This reimagining of Australia's pioneering past, although becoming less common, seems to be conjured as a touchstone for urban dwellers who centre their sense of being Australian on a rural traditionalist image. Murray has always written in support of the ordinary Australians, those sustained by myths of the "Australian legend"<sup>11</sup> and traditions of rural pioneer values, a position which Murray believed was embraced by the majority of Australians (Bourke 1992, 30-3), a claim which today might not hold up to scrutiny. While Murray seeks a new fusion of cultures as a "vernacular republic" he often contrasts the dispossessed, disadvantaged and anti-authoritarian characteristics of the "rural poor"<sup>12</sup> with the urban liberal-thinking elites. As the majority of Australia's population lives in urban centres such a rural outlook could be seen as Steven Matthews puts it, a "personalised and synthetic version of the 'nation'" (2001, 156).

Of the contemporary moment, Australian history specialist James Curran (2020) writes that "Australians have not warmed necessarily to those who tried to create new myths of Australian nationalism" and "those who have banged the nationalist drum in Australian politics have tended to come unstuck". Curran's observations may well be salutary in contemporary Australia, but the early poets from the "Bulletin School",<sup>13</sup> such as Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, Steele Rudd, and Mary Gilmore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inspired Australians with their poetry's endeavour to cast off British traditions. And Graeme Davison writes about Australian nationalists throughout this period as: "other Australians yearned for a deep or primordial connection to their land" (Davison 2012, 436).

Although Murray had his own deep connection with his land and traditional Australian values that he sourced from this period, his poetry was also sensitive to cultural debates and contemporary issues. This sensitivity is notable in his poem "Amanda's Painting" (Murray 1996, 450), Murray's self-portrait of his poetic progress, for example in which:

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<sup>11</sup> Ward defined the Australian national character by the values and attitudes of the country bushman (Ward 1958).

<sup>12</sup> Murray refers to a larger class of "rural poor" as individuals or groups that were socially disadvantaged, which included poorer rural workers, Aboriginals and any Australian that was disadvantaged by the ruling elite.

<sup>13</sup> The "Bulletin School" was a term used to describe the literary group that had their work published in the Bulletin magazine whilst under the guidance of JF Archibald who founded the publication in 1880, promoting Australian writers with ideals of nationalism. (National Museum Australia 2020)

... I'm propelling the little craft with speech.

The faded rings around my loose bulk shirt

are of five lines each, a musical lineation... (7-9).

If we read the poetic persona as a proxy for Murray's own perspective, we see a "propelling" and progression of his "little craft" as his poetry's continual movement, his "musical lineation" throughout his career. Murray sees himself, through his poetic persona, coming home up a river seated:

It is a small metal boat lined in eggshell (3).

The smallness of his boat and the fragility of the eggshell lining gives us a clue perhaps to Murray's feeling of vulnerability to criticism, as his poetic persona is the boat:

and my hands grip the gunwale rims. I'm

a composite bow, tensioning the whole boat,

steering it with my gaze. No oars, no engine... (4-6).

Murray expresses his "war" to uphold his traditional rural values against what he imagines as the "dark hills" of criticism from urban intellectuals, with these lines:

...and on the far shore rise

dark hills of the temperate zone. To these, at this

moment in the painting's growth, my course is slant

but my eye is on them. To relax, to speak European (14-17).

Murray's "slant", his different, oblique view of things as a poet, becomes more evident as his poetic career grows like the "painting's growth" (Matthews 2001, 3). Steven Matthews proposed that "Murray is braced between two Worlds", the temperate north and the Southern tropics (2001, 1), or the cultural links to Europe and the history of Australia's colonial past. Murray emphasises his traditionalist "slant", since to "relax" is to forego his Australian heritage and to give in to progressive European influences.

## 2. Murray's poetic voice, focus, and cultural and spiritual landscape

From the beginning of his career when he first moved from Bunyah to the city in 1957, Murray made a conscious decision to write poetry about Australian subjects and not to follow more fashionable American or European literary trends that were popular at that time. He remarked that when he came to Sydney from his family's farm, he realised quickly that if he "sold out on the bush" he would lose his inspiration and subject matter for his poetry (Bourke 1986, 177). Murray stayed true to his Australian roots in his poetry and essays throughout his career, expressing the voice of ordinary Australians, when many of his literary peers in the 1960s and 1970s were moving to Britain to further their careers. Young modernist or urban intellectual poets who supported a "New Australian Poetry", opposed traditionalist and nationalists such as Murray, because they saw Australia as a cultural backwater (McCooey 2000, 158).

Such views of Australian culture were voiced in 1950 when Arthur Phillips, an Australian writer, critic and educator, coined the phrase "cultural cringe" to describe the prejudice against Australian writers, artists and intellectuals who sought to promote things Australian (Hesketh 2013, 92). By contrast, Murray and other Australian poets, including Bruce Dawe and Geoff Page used colloquial language in their poetry as a way of striking a distinctive national voice, and, as Mark O'Connor asserts, the "freedom to use his or her 'ain vulgaire'" (O'Connor 1981, 55). Murray, in his poem "A Brief History", from his provocative and critically acclaimed collection of poems *Subhuman Redneck Poems, 1996* (2018, 388), provides a retort to those who have sought to suppress the values and attitudes of what he deems to be distinctively Australian. The following lines from the poem are full of scorn for English elitism and Enlightenment:

A short history gets you imperial scorn,  
 maintained by hacks after the empire is gone... (6-7).  
 Some Australians would die before they said mate, ... (11).  
 ...since literature turned on them  
 and bodiless jargons without reverie  
 scorn their loves as illusion and biology (27-29).

"A short history" and "hacks after the empire is gone" refer to the derision of Australia's convict colonial history by Australians who privilege British and European history and culture.

Murray's distrust of the European Enlightenment that seeks to explain all with science emerges in the expressed contempt for "illusion and biology". The voice of the "cultural cringe" sought to undermine and to devalue things Australian, while, in defiance of this attitude, Murray was a staunch defender of the core Australian rural values that he held as the foundation of his "vernacular republic".

As Murray continued to draw on his Australian experiences for his poetry, he became nationally recognised as a major poet and the critical acclaim grew. However, some critics cast Murray as out of touch with contemporary Australia, although it seems that in doing so, they overlook the ways in which Murray helped to develop a distinctive voice for Australian poetry. One such critic is Gregory Mellenish who, in 1976, commented that Murray's idea of nationalism "is out of date" and that it "no longer accords with the facts of Australian life" (1976, 33-36). Mellenish's criticism hinged on his belief that classical and modern languages were more important than the origins of the Australian culture,<sup>14</sup> and "the maintenance of European identity" far outweighed any relevance of an Australian vernacular, of the type that Murray used in his poetry. Mellenish went further to state that Murray's collection *Vernacular Republic* and Murray's concept of a republic for ordinary Australians, was an "arrogant monolingual nation with a culture built up from the poverty of its Melbourne Cup, gum tree and Fair Go cultural tradition" (Mellenish 1976). Such was the resistance to poets like Murray who sought to break through the "cultural cringe" barrier, but whose artistic efforts and lasting influence would be broadly recognised many years later by writers such as Tim Winton (Macquarie University 2009).

Murray was one of the writers instrumental in opening up Australian poetry, encouraging and enabling subsequent writers to use their own poetic voices, although he was also reticent to allow himself to be categorised as representing any one style (O'Connor 1981, 54). Andrew Frisardi (Frisardi 2003) describes Murray's poetry as "baroque folk", a combination of "low style" with a "sophisticated poetic technique;" and Peter Porter comments that Murray used baroque language in his poetry for "enrichment of definition" (Porter 1985, 45). Others, however, sought to label him as "reactionary and outdated" (Bourke 1992, 44), but Murray's poetry, I would argue, was at times expansive and challenging with two verse novels: *Fredy Neptune* (1998) and *The Boys Who Stole The Funeral* (1980) and a collection of poems

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<sup>14</sup> Matthews notes that Mellenish's claim was self-contradictory because all nationalisms are what their racial origins promote (2001, 162n7).

*Translations From The Natural World* (1992) that seeks to communicate the embodiment of living things: ideas he wrote about that only an accomplished poet could ascend. Such judgments of Murray's poetry are for another debate, but there is no doubt that Murray adopted the vernacular to maintain his authentic Australian "slant".

Any reflection on what Murray describes in the vernacular as being uniquely Australian, would not be complete without recognising his connection to his land which is highlighted in Martin Leer's comment that "the external landscape is more central to the experiencing consciousness than anything he carries internalised in his head" (Hergenhan and Clunies Ross 2001, 15). The imagery of Murray's literary landscapes was no doubt fuelled by his spiritual connectedness to his land, his "Wunger place",<sup>15</sup> in much the same way that his Scottish Lowland forebears held their homeland sacred.

Murray when describing his connection to family and place and his Scottish heritage in his essay "The Bonnie Disproportionate" (1984), draws on the Gaelic term *corracagailte*, which means the glowing coals that are left after a fire or the essence, the distillation of heritage and deepest meaning that has a strong emotional quality (Murray 1984b, 72). It is poems such as "Evening Alone at Bunyah" (Murray 2018, 12), which is about his return from the cities of the world to his home at Bunyah, that capture all the emotional contexts of *corracagailte*. References to Murray's father, his own childhood, and "the old days" cast a warm if melancholy shroud over the poem, giving autobiographical significance to his emotional centre and deep connection to his land:

This country is my mind. I lift my face

and count my hills, and linger over one: (87-88).

There is a mythical quality that arises from the poetic first-person voice, as he shares with the reader his personal relationship with his father and his spiritual connection with his land. There is also a romantic hue to the pastoral imagery of landscapes familiar to Murray, which convey the deep level of connectedness he has with his land. Murray conjures mythical images by leading the reader to ask questions that have no clue of an answer, only an evocation of emotion:

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<sup>15</sup> The Aboriginal term "Wunger" place refers an Aboriginal description of a spiritual "everlasting home" (Murray 1984a, 18).



Beneath the moon, an ancient radiance comes

back from far hillsides (113-114).

...

lest I should hear

the barking of dogs from a clearing where no house

has ever stood, and, walking down a road

in the wilderness, meet a man who waited there

beside a creek to tell me what I sought (119-122).

The lines above leave the reader pondering this pastoral scene where the poet searches for memories of his father. The mystical sense of place, an imagining of something familiar but not tangible, local but not definitive, is, paradoxically, an ineffable element of the vernacular in Murray's treatment of the "vernacular republic".

Paul Kane writes that "for Murray poetry is a numinous thing" and thus "not susceptible to ordinary rational explication: it cannot be explained only affirmed and experienced" (Kane 1996, 188). This spiritual and emotional quality, which resides in a deeper consciousness that Murray termed "Wholespeak", refers to language that arises from poetic integration: a balance and harmony of the conscious, rational daylight thinking and the subconscious or dreaming state (1996, 186). Any attempt to capture a large reality such as Australia, is fraught with difficulty, since there is always the risk of doing injustice to pieces somehow diminished or elided. And indeed, in his essay "The Trade in Images", Murray expresses how "the whole can't be described it; can only be evoked" (Murray 1999c, 170). In Murray's poetry, metaphors are often used to evoke the emotional response to express the parts of the whole meaning that can't be described. The poet leads the reader to ponder an idea that releases an emotional response. This experience of interpreting the metaphorical aspects of the focus of Murray's poetry, provides a more complete understanding of his "vernacular republic" and goes some way to achieving the inclusivity to which he aspired.

Murray's distinctive privileging of the vernacular is also elaborated on in his treatment of the so-called Boeotian/Athenian dichotomy (discussed in his essay "The Boeotian Strain" (Murray 1980, 45)), which has its origins in Ancient Greece, in the conflicts between the regions Boeotia and Attica. Murray views symbolic Boeotia as rural, practical and traditional, and poses its

antithesis Athens (Attica) as urban, liberal and progressive. He claims the majority of Australians as Boeotian, centred on traditional rural values. The point of Murray's Boeotian/Athenian dichotomy is, after all, his desire for balance within his "vernacular republic", as he considers rural Boeotia as embracing the disadvantaged, among whom he includes Aboriginal peoples and the rural poor.

Murray's poem "Sydney and the Bush" (2018, 123) epitomises his feelings as a Boeotian poet and figures the Boeotian/Athenian dichotomy, which has its roots in his lowlands, Scottish heritage. In the following lines of the poem we see the struggle between the disadvantaged convicts and bushman and the authoritarian warders and the urban factories:

Then convicts bled and warders bred... (5).

Then bushman sank and factories rose

and warders set the tone – (13-15).

The bushman and convicts are Murray's Boeotian allies, to which he adds the disadvantaged Aboriginal peoples of Australia:

... the men of fire and of Earth

became White men and Black (7-8).

The Boeotian spiritual elements of fire and earth are metaphors for the white and black people of Murray's "rural poor", sharing common anti-authoritarian sentiments of the disadvantaged who occupy the space of a "vernacular republic". This political struggle of ordinary people to gain recognition erodes Murray's case that the vernacular and by extension his "vernacular republic" are in some way politically inert.

### **3. Murray's use of the vernacular**

Peter Elbow claims that "a local spoken language that was scorned for writing could be used for writing of the highest seriousness and quality" (Elbow 2012, 341-2). These sentiments expressed in relation to fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante's vernacular, could be applied to Murray's relishing of an Australian vernacular idiom. Taking in colloquial language as well as deliberately ambiguous word usage and complex metaphors, Murray's use of poetic language provokes the reader to think more deeply about Australian-inflected human traits, such as the free spirit, egalitarianism, understated laconic humour, inclusiveness, larrikinism and

forthrightness, all of which Murray claimed as part of the “vernacular republic” (Matthews 2001, 28-29).

According to Murray the Australian vernacular is the “sub-soil” of our common daily life (1999d, 73), but his use of vernacular is nonetheless varied. The subjects Murray wrote about were clearly Australian, but he used vernacular language in often subtle ways which allowed him to write about complex ideas and subjects without making such language the point of the poem, but to inflect the themes and ideas he wanted to express as uniquely Australian. For example, Murray’s poem “The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever” (2018, 233), on first reading may seem paradoxical but he uses the insouciance of the contrasting images he forms and the vernacular to deliver his metaphorical message of what the wearing of shorts means. Murray playfully reminisces about the wearing of shorts as a casual pursuit:

to camp out along the river bends  
for good, wearing shorts, with a pocket knife,  
a fishing line and matches, (4-6).

He juxtaposes this common image, the “scunge” of wearing shorts, with people in high office:

archbishops and field marshals  
at their ceremonies never wear shorts.  
The very word  
means underpants in North America (17-20).

Murray reinforces this contrast between common shorts wearers:

Shorts can be Tat,  
Land-Rovering bush-environmental tat (21-22).

And the elite and sophisticated, with these lines:

...modelling negligée  
of the kingdom of Flaunt,  
that unchallenged aristocracy (26-28).

Wearing shorts in this poem symbolises a freedom of spirit gained when the importance of position and social standing are cast off. This freedom of spirit and the sense of humour evident in the lines above also reflect the poetic significance and some effects of the vernacular itself.

Murray's technique of creating imagery rather than telling the whole story, and his seamless interweaving of the Australian vernacular, gives nuanced meaning to his poem "The Mitchells" (Murray 2018, 117). The poem, which is about two working men, who are related, having lunch outdoors, is written in plain language and figures Australian cultural traits of understatement and a laconic sense of humour. The colloquial language in this poem, whose tone is almost conversational, is spoken by an omniscient narrator:

I am seeing this: two men sitting on a pole... (1).

Murray creates an image of the scene of the two men having lunch:

Water boils in a prune tin.

Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white (3-4).

...

The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a Styrofoam

box with a handle (6-7).

But the narrator predicts what they will say and how they will react because he knows them intimately as the two men's traits are familiar. The following lines have a sardonic humour that understates the drought in traditional Australian characterisation with a simile of the improbability of growing anything on a road:

...One is overheard saying:

*drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road* (8).

In the poem, the interchange of "I'm one of the Mitchells" that both men agree to, is both unifying because they identify as being of the one clan, and tinged with laconic humour as the understated response of solidarity is said with "pain and subtle amusement". We sense the two men are from rural regions of Australia, but Murray deliberately expands the tent of inclusivity with:

... Sometimes the scene is an avenue (14).

This line expands the characteristics of the Mitchells to include all and not just rural people, as the “avenue” is a metonym for the city.<sup>16</sup>

Based on his notion of three main Australian cultures, Aboriginal, rural and urban, Murray’s acclaimed poem “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle” (2018, 137) presents an inclusive vision of the fusion of the three cultures. Murray said he conceived the idea of writing a cycle of poems in the style and translation of Aboriginal poet Wonguri-Mandjikai’s piece, “Song Cycle of the Moon Bone” (University of NSW Press 2011). Murray’s poem dramatizes and crystallises his idea of a “vernacular republic”, as it describes both the mundane and ritualistic aspects of Australian life: Christmas holidays in the country, barbeques, family interactions, migrating birds, and the familiarity of returning to homelands and nature that reconnects Australians to the land. This poem highlights Murray’s notion of writing in the vernacular because it seeks to express how many ordinary Australians live and converse. Each of the poem’s thirteen sections is one step of a journey, a celebration or, as Murray puts it, “an unacknowledged spiritual walkabout” (Murray 1984, 24). Murray’s vision of the rainbow serpent is a vision of car’s tail lights:

that big stunning snake; it is looped through the hills, burning all night  
there (24-25).

His vernacular descriptions range from vivid imagery:

Fresh sheets have been spread and tucked tight, childhood rooms have  
been seen to (11-12).

To the spiritual experience of celestial gazing:

the Pleiades are pinned up high on the darkness, away back above the  
Manning (298-299).

The familiar vernacular poetic voice shares his sense of human vulnerability:

toddlers, running away purposefully at random, among cars, into big

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<sup>16</sup> Jason Clapham in his critical account of this poem for *The English Review* (2008), concurred that the Australian traits displayed by the Mitchells, in Murray’s eyes, are synonymous with all Australians, either rural, urban or Aboriginal.

drownie water (come back, Cheryl-Anne!) (116-117).

There is also rhythmic chant, whose origins emanate from Wonguri-Mandjikai's poem, with the alliteration and assonance offered in elevated voice with spiritual echoes:

The stars of the holiday step out all over the sky.

People look up at them, out of their caravan doors and their campsites;

people look up from the farms before going back; they gaze at their year's

worth of stars.

The cross hangs head-downward, out there over the Markwell; (282-286).

...hanging eastwards, it shines on the sawmills and the lakes, on the glasses

of the old people (290-291).

Through a fusion of contrasting images and vernacular narrative, the poem suggests how Australian people may be unified through a common sense of place and familiarity with the land.

Perhaps Murray's most lasting contribution to Australian poetry has been to legitimise the Australian vernacular as a complex and allusive voice of what it is to be Australian.

#### **4. "Sprawl"**

As I have aimed to show in the sections above, some of the features Murray understands as integral to a "vernacular republic" can evade accurate description and their meaning and significance are often found in images rather than in any attempt at precise definition. Australian vernacular, the language of the ordinary Australian, is the most fitting register through which to render the attitudes and characteristics that reside in "Sprawl". This is a term coined by Murray to capture what he regards as the unique qualities of the Australian character, signifying an anti-authoritarian individual disposition, a confident (though not arrogant), rebuttal of class hierarchy, an understated frankness, and a laid-back manner that is calm under pressure. For all such description, "Sprawl" defies precise definition and so it is through the imagery and ambiguity in Murray's poetry's that such meanings are pointed to rather than explained. Murray commented that the term "Sprawl", borrowed from his father, is "a kind of shirtsleeve nobility of gesture, not a pinched arse puritan at all" (Smith 2009). Such human gestures and emotions are difficult to capture, but to put it in vernacular terms, "Sprawl" may

break the rules but it's authentic and displays a wry sense of humour. Larrikins, for example have "Sprawl" in abundance, as Murray expresses in his poem "The Quality of Sprawl" (1999, 1):

Sprawl is doing your farming by aeroplane, roughly,  
or driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home (6-7).

The "Sprawl" that Murray describes here is casually articulate: by expressing the ordinary with extra-ordinary examples, it 'shows off' in a laconic way. This poem's images display the easygoing positive outlook that supports a resilient and confident nature Murray imagines as an Australian characteristic:

Sprawl leans on things. It is loose-limbed in its mind.  
  
Reprimanded and dismissed  
it listens with a grin and one foot up on the rail  
of possibility. It may have to leave earth (46-49).

As shown here, Murray is most at home writing in the vernacular about "loosed-limbed" Australian culture in expansive and generous terms (Kane 1996, 193). Such an expression of another of Murray's "loose limbed" poems, "Broad Bean Sermon" (2018, 112), also exemplifies the qualities of "Sprawl":

Beanstalks, in any breeze, are a slack church parade  
without belief, saying *trespass against us* in unison,  
recruits in mint Air Force dacron, with unbuttoned leaves (1-3).

"Breeze" and "slack" evoke the looseness, swaying lazily, even though collectively. The church parade "without belief" is, as Murray penned in "The Quality of Sprawl" (1999), "roughly Christian"; And the nonchalance of "unbuttoned leaves" display that unpretentious attitude of "Sprawl". The title of the poem contrasts a more solemn occasion, such as religious worship, with the joyous act of picking the humble broad bean. Murray displays an irreverent reverence towards nature that is also celebratory:

beans upright like lecturing, outstretched like blessing fingers... (17).

...

like edible meanings, each sealed around with a string

and affixed to its moment, an unceasing colloquial assembly, (23-24).

In this poem Murray also celebrates “Sprawl”, a generosity of spirit that is not unique to Australians, but whose classless generosity is an intrinsic element of being Australian. Best written in the vernacular, “Sprawl” can be found throughout Murray’s poetry and is integral to his conception of the “vernacular republic”.

### **5. Murray’s influence: Comment on creative component**

The impulse and purpose of my poetry for this thesis was to capture some of the contemporary issues and themes that show how Australia is changing. It therefore explores in imaginative poetic form some of the everyday challenges facing ordinary Australians. The poems are largely written, like Murray’s poetry, in a contemporary Australian vernacular, to envision a small selection of ordinary voices in Australia.

Poems such as “Whitewashed”, “Tankman” and “Our Man on the Spot” are also topical because of the current events which are respectively highlighted by “Black Lives Matter”, geo-economic and strategic challenges confronting Australia, and the Covid-19 pandemic. With poems such as “My Grandmother’s Little Red Brick House” and “Benito Mussolini’s *Passeggiata*”, I also draw on the vernacular to evoke reminiscences about a previous era, just as Murray drew on the past, to depict through imagery and laconic narrative how things have changed, and continue to change, in Australian society.

Challenging social issues are nothing new in Australian society but I highlight the confronting realities of homelessness and drug addiction with my poems “Shopping by Trolley” and “Notes from a Drug Rehab Vollie”, both inflected with a vernacular voice. Cultural and social change in particular are on display in the poems “The Contortionists of a New World Order”, “Castle Logic” and “Sirens of Change”, which variously imagine how change occurs, and its potential implications and opportunities for Australia. Murray recognised Aboriginal peoples’ long, rich, and tormented history, and their connection to country as fundamental to any notion of an Australian national identity. I explore such ideas in “Durba Gorge”, “Invisible Signs” and “Scarred for Life”, which also pay tribute to my respect for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes as the first sovereign nations of the Australian continent. The collection is capped with a celebration of the poet Les Murray and a laconic “sprawl” through some recollections of his poetic influences, experiences and contribution to Australian culture.



## Conclusion

The thesis has offered imaginative set of poetic and critical literary reflections on elements of Australia's complexity as a changing nation.

The inspiration for this work has been Australian poet Les Murray's own imaginings about the Australian nation, identity, and values. Murray consistently wrote about Australian themes to situate and enliven his notion of an Australian "vernacular republic". In the dissertation, drawing on a small sample of his poetry, I have teased out some of these features, and have identified their distinctive cultural and poetic significance and effects. Murray's persistence in writing in the vernacular about things Australian deliberately pushed back against the "cultural cringe", and helped establish a vernacular Australian literary language, which—even as that language expands to take in alternative voices, registers and accents—will be his lasting legacy alongside his considerable oeuvre.

Murray was not seeking to represent all of Australia's culturally diverse population, as this is too big a task for any one poet. He did, however, draw together as a mosaic many of the pieces of a traditional view of Australian culture as a foundation on which others can continue to build a mosaic of what it might (differently) mean to be Australian.

Murray preferred the use of vernacular because it gave voice to ordinary Australian people in ways that retain and promote the qualities he saw as vital for his "vernacular republic" without becoming politically polarising. In reality this is perhaps a naïve assumption, but the ambiguity and nimbleness of poetry can tread both sides of the divide whilst pointing to inequalities and injustices. With the purpose of change and repair, such an endeavour necessarily involves politics.

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