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## THE RADICAL POETICS OF THE GENDERED URBAN QUOTIDIAN: READING ANNA COUANI'S LITERARY EXPERIMENTALISM OF THE 1970S AND 1980S

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### *I*

Anna Couani is an important iconoclastic writer whose main body of work, published in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, redefined the parameters of the Australian literary field. This article examines Anna Couani's formal experimentation which it locates within the gendered and cultural contexts of minoritisation. It examines how Couani's post-romantic critique of realism constitutes an exploration of subjectivity and identity formation. Her experimental fiction, I argue, in its efforts to defamiliarise reading conventions, articulates a crisis of belonging. In its radical poetics of the gendered everyday it seeks to locate the body in the alternative communities which characterise minority constituencies.

Anna Couani is a third-generation Australian; her parents were of non-Anglo backgrounds but were both born in Australia. Her maternal grandfather was Polish and her father's parents came from Kastellorizo, Greece. Her parents were involved in political activism in Australia and they visited the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Her father was involved in the Atlas Club (a Greek Communist Party club). Couani describes her mother as having an ambivalent relationship with the Greek community

because she was Polish and had an independent career. In an interview with Sneja Gunew (2000) Couani describes her mother as being ‘assimilated to the point where she likes to believe that she is Anglo-Australian’ (unpublished). She suggests that a number of factors, including their complex ethnicity and their understanding of their roles as women, meant that her family, like that of her mother’s, were ‘isolated’. She describes her own generation as being equivocal about its ethnic background. On the one hand it wanted to conform to the mainstream, and was critical of the traditional Greek community. On the other hand it was not totally accepted by the Anglo community. This made individuals such as herself become pro-Greek and anti-Anglo. She relates in the same interview with Gunew that within her own family there was a division between ‘white wog’ (her mother’s Northern- European Polish side) and ‘black wog’ (her father’s Southern-European Greek side).

Couani has remarked that during the 1960s she was looking for a community to which she could feel a sense of belonging. Her way of doing this was to identify with an alternative arts and literary community. She developed friendships with a number of writers such as Ken Bolton, Kris Hemensley and Robert Kenny and conceptual artists such as Neil Evans, who influenced her development as a writer. During the mid-1970s she was starting to develop her hallmark style as an experimental writer. Hemensley’s experimental magazines *The Ear in a Wheatfield* (1972–76) and later *H/ear* (1980s) made a marked impact on Couani’s development. Kenny published three of her books in his publishing series Rigmarole Books. In this article I undertake a chronological survey of Couani’s *oeuvre* which spans 1977–89.<sup>1</sup> I examine the textual strategies of her literary experimentalism and how, for example, her interest in first-

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<sup>1</sup> This article emerged from research undertaken for an entry on Couani in the ‘Australian Writers 1975–2000’ for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Vol. 325) (New York: Thomson Gale, 2006) 53–58. Here, I would like to thank David Jardine for his excellent research assistance.

person and anti-realist modes persisted, albeit in slightly altered forms, throughout this period. In order to situate her experimentalism within the reading conventions of the period, I also survey the reception of her five literary books – *Italy* (1977), *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* (1982), *Leaving Queensland and The Train* (1983), *The Harbour Breathes* (1989), and *The Western Horizon* (2004).

## II

Her first book, *Italy*, was published by Rigmarole Books in 1977. It was heavily influenced by Couani's interest in the *nouveau roman*. As such it aims to comment upon the tradition of the realist novel. The short pieces discard the conventions of realist narrative and frustrate readerly expectations around closure, characterisation, point of view and description. In drawing on the narratively undramatic material of domestic life they stage a pointedly gendered investigation into and extension of the realist novel's interest in everyday life. If realist prose fiction has drawn on the category of the urban quotidian, and directs its attention to the process of urban modernisation, it does so through the textual elaboration of the interiority of the subject, that is through what one theorist has called the creation of a literary 'affective individualism' (Bell 2000). *Italy* talks to and critiques this tradition of character- and story-based narrative. In its short pieces the descriptive processes of realist fiction are used for very different ends. Realist prose fiction is characterised by an interest in detail, particularly in the expressive actions and vernacular styles of the body. *Italy*, however, mobilises the visual effects of description to produce quite different effects. The 'realism' of the conventional novel invokes truth effects through figural elaborations of concealment and secrecy. In realism the development of the characters' adventures produces in the reader a sense of intimacy with and proximity to them and their unfolding interior lives. However, *Italy's* interest in the visibility of description is quite different. The domestic, urban and coastal scenes, populated by sketchily drawn 'characters' are

virtually devoid of plot or story or indeed any trace of narrative significance. Traditional gender roles are evacuated. This overall rhetorical effect of flatness and depthlessness is a feature of the *nouveau roman*. In realist prose fiction descriptive detail is used to invoke the social organisation of detail in the real world. As Susan Stewart (1984) argues, such organisation is always hierarchical (26); it thus works in concert with the teleological drive of narrative. As Stewart suggests, surface detail that is presented to us without hierarchy, as we see in Couani's prose, 'does not tell us enough and yet it tells us too much' (27).

Writing which interrupts the conventions of realist prose fiction exposes how the truth effects of this fiction work. It foregrounds the artefactuality of the genre and, in the process of defamiliarising our reading habits, exposes the *unreality* of realism. As Stewart argues, 'to describe more or less than is socially adequate ... [increases] the unreal effect of the real' (27). *Italy* thus foregrounds the realist strategies of conventional fiction. Pieces such as 'The View', for example, disrupt narrative point-of-view and ideas of looking and perspective. Joan Kirkby (1983), for example, notes in her chapter on Couani, there are many images of windows, balconies, rooms with views, mirrors, and hidden and detached observers in *Italy*. These can be seen to figure the condition of the divided, post-humanist self, and its self-reflective splitting. 'Detective Story' similarly self-consciously employs notions of narrative sense-making, allegories of reading and detection, and imagery of light and shadow (491–98).

Its female narrative pointedly suggests that women are detecting, that is, they are agents of naming and analysis. Another piece, 'what a man', is a repetitious poetic piece which works on sound and semantic strings of association. It activates the seductive lure of narrative as we strive to decipher the contour of a story in this associative list of monosyllabic words. The paratactical structure problematises the narrative closure.

It is clear that Couani's methodology in this first book, then, is self-reflexively literary and that it mobilises the generic conventions of the *nouveau roman* in order to critique realist fiction. During the decade or so of the publication of her literary books, there was a marked lack of engagement on the part of reviewers and essayists with Couani's literary antecedents and a narrow critical lexicon employed to assess Couani's experimentalism. Kirkby, for example, is representative of this period in judging Couani's experimental prose according to the conventions of realist prose, and finding the former inevitably 'constrain[ed]', 'confin[ed]' and 'circumscrib[ed]'. The images of limitation ironically reflect the narrow range of literary generic conventions according to which the work is judged. When Kirkby does refer to the *nouveau roman* it is to mention that it works to 'suppress subjectivity' and 'feelings'. It would be interesting to extend this observation to ask about the political and generic implications of denaturalising subjectivity. Similarly, while Harrison-Ford (1978), in an intelligent and favourable review of *Italy*, comments that the book demonstrates 'how terribly structured much "realist" fiction can be', and imagines that *Italy* functions as a 'corrective' (19), the discussion of the poetics of her experimental prose he does not develop further.

The pieces in *Italy* were written in 1974–75.<sup>2</sup> Many years later, in 1989, Couani described, in 'Author's Statement', her work during this

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<sup>2</sup> Strangely enough, while *Italy* was inspired by Mediterranean architecture, landscape and light (hence the somewhat randomly chosen title), Couani had not yet travelled to the region when she wrote these pieces. She was to do so in 1978 and her next book, *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* (1982), was written during this period of travel. Perhaps the title of this book can best be understood retrospectively, that is, by considering the significance of Italy as a signifier in Couani's later work and commentary. In the title story from *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories*, for example, Italy has a central symbolic role as the country of origin of the Italian woman unhappily married to the Russian, in Auntie Cis' story about her neighbours. The Italian woman's lover later asks her to meet him in Italy

period as 'striving for an effect of objectivity, perfection and stasis' (Brooks and Walker, 31). She said that 'this style was in some ways a self-protecting reaction to a hostile environment' (Brooks and Walker, 31). The 'hostile environment' no doubt refers both to the literary conservatism of the period and also to her ethnic and gendered difference. She resolved, in her next book, to adopt what she saw as an overtly feminist stance and to 'take the bull by the horns and adopt the maligned "female style" of first person use [and a] subjective/emotional stance' (Brooks and Walker, 31). Couani is, needless to say, careful to insist that the first-person narrative mode does not always 'mean you are writing about yourself' (Brewster, 33). While *Italy* bears traces of Couani's interest in oral genres (for example in the dialogue section of 'Untitled', and her references to family jokes ['Lovers', 48] and childhood stories), the title piece of *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* (1982) develops further her interest in the oral genres of a gendered everyday life, particularly conversation.

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(*Were All Women Sex-mad?*, 38) and this is the country where she eventually suicides. In this story then, Italy functions as a sign of desire – for a lost homeland or an impossible love. In an unpublished interview with Sneja Gunew in 2000, Couani states that 'I see Europe finishing at Italy ... I think Greeks are really middle easterners and not Europeans at all' (*The Harbour Breathes*, 13\*). Here Italy is a cypher for Europe. In personal correspondence, Couani has written:

My actual experience with the Mediterranean countries when I wrote Italy was mostly based on my reading of writers who used that landscape and on my study of architecture ... So I found myself with a manuscript which had a Mediterranean feel to it. I didn't really want to refer to any specific place (like Kastellorizo) because the places I described were mostly fictional and I'd never been there. I didn't want to refer to Greece either, so I used the word, Italy ... It's a title in the tradition of Joe Brainard and that kind of American ironic thing. Not with a literal meaning, but with layers of meaning and not so serious. (Brewster 2004)

If realist prose fiction maps everyday life, it does so through the reproduction of particular forms of subjectivity. Couani's experimental prose, which also investigates the urban quotidian, produces temporal and spatial maps of urban life which rely more on narrative techniques such as conversation and dialogue than on plot and characterisation, as I suggest above. Her use of dialogue differs from that with which we are familiar in realist fiction. Couani's dialogue does not serve the interests of characterisation but is rather a vehicle for the elaboration of ideas. In the titular piece, for example, although speakers are identified and, as the narrative progresses, are linked in a web of friendships and relationships, they do not develop the 'three-dimensional' depth characteristic of realist fiction.

The dialogues of 'Were All Women Sex-mad?' are in fact more like monologues, in that they are sustained speeches or 'raves'. They focus largely on the gendered world of relationships: on romance, friendship, and the interactions of families and neighbours. The subjects of these relationships variously experience love, loss, migration and travel. Their conversations revolve around histories of intimacy and distanciation. The slowly unfolding web of memories and connections between the speakers constitutes an alternative community which expounds the values of freedom, cosmopolitanism and love, through talk. This alternative community overtly aims to evade the compulsions of reproductive heteronormativity.

This 'new Utopian lifestyle' gives centre stage to 'personal' issues and the development of personal ethics (*Were All Women Sex-mad?*, 49). As one character playfully puts it, their conversations constitute a 'School of Life' (22). One speaker talks about 'learning be independent'; 'making commitments to way of life without realising the consequences of those decisions' and 'doing the right thing with a sense of purpose' (49). Interestingly, these statements are couched retrospectively; the speaker is nostalgically recalling 'those days [when] I was so certain of what I was doing' (49). Nonetheless, the conversations and talk continue to

proliferate, even if this 'new' utopianism has been eclipsed within the titular story by the inexorable march of time.

These speakers are immersed in passionate and urgent conversation. Their passion to 'talk about what's going on' (*Were All Women Sex-mad?*, 12) is seen to contrast markedly with the taciturnity, defensiveness, anti-intellectualism and cynicism of mainstream white Australian culture. In mainstream public culture, generally, people 'think conversation on a serious level is a joke' (30), one speaker suggests. If *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* imagines a counter public-sphere of passionate, thoughtful talk in its various forms – conversation, gossip, jokes – it is essentially a sphere which foregrounds a self-conscious relationality. The enunciative positions in the titular story, for example, are always defined in relation to other people – in specific, intensely lived and felt engagements.

It is no surprise then that Couani's choice of narrative mode is that of the first person, whether in the form of direct speech, or occasionally (in the *other stories* of the collection) that of an omniscient narrator. Couani (1981) herself has said that she chose to use the first person because she wanted her work 'to feel immediate' (194). Certainly the choice of first person was also a political one; she was making a conscious decision to recuperate a 'maligned "female style"' (Brooks and Walker, 31) that had been trivialised as 'too subjective, too emotional' (Couani 1981, 194). The personal voice (in its various modes) in *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* performs the work of a recognisably *embodied* ethics. It foregrounds the lived contexts of events and the fact that the imperatives issuing from the body are always the products of intercorporeal and intersubjective exchanges.

If the pieces in *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* constitute an alternative everyday life, like everyday life many of the conversations and monologues lack closure and continuity. The pieces convey the immediacy, the sense of potentiality and the dynamic, fluid and singular nature of everyday life. One speaker characterises their life as being



marked by 'a sense of beginning everything rather than a sense of having to maintain everything' (49–50). Most of the pieces thus foreclose on any neat notion of closure or resolution in the speakers' lives. They remind us of the lack of neat narrative order and the repetitions of everyday life. As one character puts it: 'no-one ever seems to be able to co-ordinate with me so [that] we're both in love at the same time' (14).

By eschewing, in *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories*, the so-called neutral and objective narration that she employs in *Italy*, Couani nonetheless subscribes to a similar agenda: the intensely and intimately personalised enunciative positions of *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* attempt to highlight the gendered and racialised specificities of cultural forms such as literature and to demonstrate that – to borrow Colebrook's (2002) words from another context – there is 'no point of view outside specific contexts and communities, no transcendent point of justification' (691). Yet in contrast with *Italy* – which some critics saw as representing alienation and isolation (Gunew 1994, 120) – *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* focuses on the idea of community. It is clear that, during the 1970s and 1980s, Couani's experimental writing posed a critique of the exclusions of mainstream white Australian culture, particularly those of the publishing and literary industries. In convening an alternative literary imaginary she and other writers created alternative and feminist communities to counter their marginalisation, communities which aimed to foreground the cultural and political assumptions discursively reproduced in the reading habits of the mainstream literary community and the academy.

Experimental writing foregrounds the relation between literary producer and consumer, in that it promotes an active, participatory form of reading. Because it defamiliarises reading habits, it foregrounds the reading contract. We are reminded of the relative status, the hierarchy of literary genres and the value generated by different forms of literary production. In this way experimental writing foregrounds the social and material nature of literature – the (discursively and industrially) mediated

nature of the relationship between literary producer and consumer. The relation between the two is a self-conscious aspect of Couani's literary practice; she commented that:

It became obvious to me that reading, editing, book production and promotion, organising, teaching were all integral parts of the discourse and things I should pursue as actively as writing. (Brooks and Walker, 30)

Active participation within alternative literary and feminist communities as editors and small-press publishers, in parallel with their labour as writers, was a feature of other experimental writers' practice during the same period, as we see, for example, with many L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers in the United States in the 1970s. The alternative community of talk that Couani figures in *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* found its counterpart in the real life community of experimental and feminist writers which she became part of in the 1970s.

During the mid-1970s Couani became committed to small-press publishing as a means of disseminating experimental writing. She edited the magazine of experimental writing, *Magic Sam* (1976–80) with Ken Bolton and a book series (initially also with Bolton) called Sea Cruise Books. From 1976–81 she published single-authored books by Joanne Burns, Ken Bolton, Denis Gallagher, Kris Hemensley, Robert Kenny and Kerry Leves; her own collection with Barbara Brooks, *Leaving Queensland & The Train* (1983); two anthologies of short, experimental Australian prose titled *Island in the Sun* (1980) and *Island in the Sun 2* (1981); and *The Harbour Breathes*, with Peter Lyssiotis, in 1989.<sup>3</sup> All her own books were published by small presses. She has commented that she saw the period between 1972 and 1975 as the heyday of small publishing in Australia and feels very disappointed by the subsequent decline in this

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<sup>3</sup> This book is unpaginated so I have inserted my own page numbers with an \* (asterisk).

industry in Australia (see Couani 1988 and 1990) and the domination of multinational presses.

In 1978 she became involved in the formation of the Poets' Union branch in Sydney. However, she found that this organisation was marked by the exclusion of women. As a result, in the early 1980s she became part of the Sydney Women Writers' Workshop which set itself up in reaction to the male-dominated Poets' Union. This feminist group, which also went by the name of 'No Regrets', produced three anthologies with that title in 1979, 1981 and 1985. It is clear that her feminist concerns inform *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories*. Couani (1988) has said that in the 1970s it was her and other feminists' goal to 'establish a female presence in print and in production' (10).

### III

Just one year after *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories* her third book, *Leaving Queensland and The Train*, appeared (1983). The first half of the book is a collection of pieces by Barbara Brooks and the second, by Couani. The pieces in *The Train* continue to investigate the concerns of *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories*, such as Couani's interest in women's first-person narrative modes. In *The Train* these investigations take the form of talk/conversation, diary entries, dreams and first-person narration pieces which she has described as being 'like essays' (1981, 194). Many reflect on the writing process. However, in spite of the apparent transparency of the first-person address, they do not aim to configure a humanist self. They emphasise the performativity and rhetoricity of the self and foreground the link between representation and identity. In 'Talking with Another Writer', for example, the narrator says: 'no matter how you try and sneak up on it or reveal it, your 'self', what you really are, is always elusive' (*The Train*, 51). Language, the tool we wield in order to 'reveal' this self, to 'lay ... character bare' (52), is figured as a train which 'roar[s] past too fast for me to jump on' (52). There's

always something left behind in our efforts to fix our experience in language.

In her third book Couani returns to her interest in realist description, in her discussion of the 'facts' that writing putatively records. She points to the crisis of the sign; the gap between signifier and signified. She identifies the function of figurative language in reinforcing the apparent literalness of its opposite, 'factual' language: 'the metaphor shields the facts, preserves them' (*The Train*, 73). In 'The Detective' she turns to the allegory of the detective in her analysis of reading and writing. Although 'there are mysteries in life', the narrator tells us, 'we have evidence if not comprehension of interpretation of the evidence' (56). 'The evidence', the detective-narrator assures us, 'is endless' (57). This narrator 'collects information,' just as the writer – both of the realist novel and the *nouveau roman* – compiles description. In literature, description conveys the illusion of reality; by making things visible, as Susan Stewart suggests, narrative shapes the relationship between characters and their environments (25), and organises experience into events (22). The narrator of 'The Detective' parodies the privileging of the scopic regime, gazing at the 'facts' through a range of lenses including a camera, binoculars, opera glasses, spectacles, telescopes, drinking glasses and windows.

The detective is also an allegory of the process of memory. In *The Train* this theme develops into a key concern. Here Couani explores memory through the modes of reminiscence, 'essayistic' writing and dream. An earlier story, 'Were All Women Sex-mad?' is structured in a complex, cyclical form where stories and letters repeat themselves. The characters are travellers, searching (unsuccessfully) for love, a home and a sense of belonging. The past is the realm of travel, and the narrative motifs of repetition and return figure the constitutive reiterations of subject formation. Our relation to the past, as John Frow (1997) reminds us, is one of desire not truth (229). Further, our narratives of reminiscence and history provide a closure that is otherwise absent from

experience and, as Stewart argues, outside the temporality of everyday life (Stewart, 22).

The detective, then, as the exemplary reader/writer, mines the everyday and transforms it through narrative. In many ways narrative has an ambivalent relationship with the everyday. The small qualitative changes of the everyday are oppositional to the periodic ruptures of history (Massumi 2002, 3) and the temporality of the novel. The everyday has been the subject of much theoretical investigation. Two other theorists whose mention of the flatness and boredom of everyday life is relevant to my discussion of Couani's anti-realist fiction, are Blanchot (1987) and Colebrook (2002). Claire Colebrook reminds us that everyday life is characterised by inaction, passivity, immobility, inertia and non-being (687–706). Blanchot also defines it as a realm of insignificance and boredom where there is nothing to know and nothing happens (12–20). This idea is playfully articulated in an earlier piece from *Italy*, the 'Starr Report'. Here the glamorous comic-strip journalist-heroine of the 1940s, like the detective, looks for the 'sweep of implication' of things, in other words, for narrative. Her friend, the suburban housewife, Sue-Ellen, by contrast, lives in the narrativeless everyday world of domesticity, surrounded by 'familiar and fond objects and spaces' (*Italy*, 57). Brenda Starr contrasts Sue-Ellen's apparent marginality in the private zone of the domestic with the intrigue, romance and mystery of the public work of investigative journalism. She admires what she imagines is the absence of anything important to describe or document, or indeed to think about, in Sue-Ellen's world: 'Everyday you see something like a row of bottles sitting quietly on a shelf without thinking, Aha! An everyday experience I hardly ever see, I'll note that down' (*Italy*, 57).

It is possible to read the 'Starr Report' on Sue-Ellen's life as a spoof on the reversals of Couani's own 'flat' *nouveau-romanesque* project and its critique of the teleology of realist fiction. Couani is as interested in the mundane, passive, routine aspects of a gendered everyday life as she is in its active aspects, even when they are not assimilated to narrative. Indeed,

she is interested in the life of objects and how they affect the body as it occupies space. In her descriptions of objects – in their spatial dimensions, form and colour – Couani shows how they impact upon people, triggering feelings, thoughts, memories, intensities, meanings. She demonstrates the pervasive inter-relations of things and bodies.

Brian Massumi (2000), summarising William James, has commented that the relationality of subjects and objects ‘registers materially in the activity of the body before it registers consciously’ (196). He also argues that ‘our awareness [of objects] is always of an already-ongoing participation in an unfolding relation’ (196). I would suggest that the flat *nouveau-romanesque* prose of *Italy* and other pieces throughout Couani’s *oeuvre* describe this zone of relationality. If, as Massumi suggests, ‘participation precedes recognition’ (196) then we can see that Couani’s project as a writer is to map this zone of ‘participation’ and bodily ‘awareness’. She is not interested in narratively elaborating the ‘recognition’ or the ‘conscious registering’ of objects as a story: this is the *métier* of the realist prose fiction writer. I (and others) have already commented on the predominance of images of looking and observing, through doors, windows, mirrors and rooms with a view in *Italy* and elsewhere in Couani’s work. I would like to suggest that, in addition to the active looking of narrators and speakers, the objects which they behold also *actively* affect the reader/holder. Just as *we* look at objects, so *they* act upon the reader/holder. Couani’s work thus foregrounds the ingressive nature of experience, that is, the quality of our being affected by objects.

Gail Weiss, in *Body Images* (1999), talks about the body’s dual inward/outward orientation in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reversibility. The body has both intracorporeal and intercorporeal relations – that is, it has relations with itself (for example between the various senses); it has relations with other bodies; and with its environment. All these relations are reversible. (For example, when we touch someone, we are both touched and touching). I am proposing that

Couani's prose describes the bodily immediacy of the relationality of subjects and objects, and the reversibility of this relationship: the fact that objects act upon us as much as we upon them. If the body is the locus of everyday life, it is also a primary source of 'evidence' about our relations with ourselves and about the world in which we live; in 'Myself' Couani writes 'I begin with my body as you do with yours' (*The Train*, 63). The second section of *The Train* comprises a number of interesting pieces about the reversibility of bodily relations. For example, in 'The Map of the World', she imagines that the body is a 'map of the world' which 'is felt from the inside' (64):

Reading a globe of the world with its topography is relief. Reading with the fingers as though blind. Feeling it with the back, down the spine. Making contact with the nipples and the nose only. (*The Train*, 64)

This is an interesting moment of intracorporeal reversibility, where we see by *touching*, 'reading with the fingers as though blind'. Elsewhere, in 'The Mask', there is an example of the interface of environment and body, where the habits of memory are seen as bodily practices:

Tonight as I was driving home I took the road I used to take on the way home from work. When I got onto that road, that particular stretch from the training school to the station and the shops, I remembered those times we drove down for lunch, to the pub after work, and all the other routine journeys home. The road now seems touching as though my body was moving along the surface of the road. (*The Train*, 70)

Like bodily relations, the text is reversible in that all textual elements are co-present, and the end is given at the same time as the beginning. (From this point of view the text differs from everyday life which is non-reversible and linear.) Memory, because it is textually mediated (and because it can be forgotten), is also reversible. In the titular piece of *The*

*Train* Couani deploys the image of the train in her figuring of memory. She describes the train as not just the past but as ‘joined together from the past and through the present into the future’; it is ‘our lives as they run together’ (75; my italics). The images of movement, continuity and fluidity are interrupted, however, by imagery of stasis: in her memory/dream the train has stopped; and the phrase ‘you can’t run away from the past’ is reiterated. The uneasy pun in the phrase, ‘You said the train always *stands* for the past’ (75; my italics), seems to embody this crisis of representation; the past is there but not there. It is static, enduring (fixed in memory, in images, in language) but it is moving (changing and being revised through the interminable transformations of *nachträglichkeit* – everyday life, in effect). This interruption in the figuring of the past is paralleled by the reversibility in *The Train* between sleep and forgetting, on the one hand, and dreaming and remembering on the other. These modes of being are discontinuous, oscillating. The troublingly ambiguous and contradictory figuration of the past is, I suggest, exemplary of the crisis of representation and the repetitions of identity formation. It is no coincidence that Couani earlier deploys the image of the train as a metaphor for the dismaying mobility of language; here ‘the train’s roaring past too fast for me to jump on’ (52).

*The Train* received mostly negative reviews. For example, Liliana Rydzynski (1983) comments, in *Aspect*, that the language is ‘commonplace’ and the ‘gaps’ ‘embarrassing’ (68). Rydzynski scolds Couani and her writing for being immature, sad, confused, doubtful and uncertain. This kind of affective response is a telling index of the prohibition on straying from the orthodox and the conventional. Similarly Carolyn Gerrish (1983) describes the prose, in *Womanspeak*, as ‘self-indulgent to the point of being ludicrous’; she describes it as ‘shallow’, ‘alienating’, ‘egotistical’ and solipsistic (27). Nonetheless, in the year that *The Train* appeared, Couani’s work started to attract serious attention. In an article on the direction of short fiction in the 1980s, subtitled ‘White Anglo-Celtic Male No More’ (1983), Elizabeth Webby



refers to a story, 'The Lace Curtain', from *Were All Women Sex-mad? & Other Stories*, as 'one of the best stories I have read for ages' (38) and a few months later in the same journal (*Meanjin*) Joan Kirkby (1983) published the first full-length article on her work titled ' "A Woman is Watching Things": The Work of Anna Couani'.

#### IV

I would argue that all Couani's work, in its investigation of cultural marginalisation and textual experimentation, exemplifies the condition of cultural/ethnic minoritisation. However, in the 1980s Couani engaged overtly with the politics of discursive multiculturalism.<sup>4</sup> Her fourth book of creative work, *The Harbour Breathes* (1989) combines text by Couani with photo montage by Peter Lyssiotis. It directly addresses issues of the exclusion and marginalisation of ethnic minority communities. Couani describes processes of their ruin, disintegration, displacement and being made invisible:

Were these the first signs of disintegration or the signs of a community which contained them. The community was containing the changes but not the price rises. The next generation moved out to the west where housing was cheap and our city became the playground of the rich. In the western ghetto the characters become invisible and so does their plight. (*The Harbour Breathes*, 8\*)

Couani suggests that there are two forces impacting upon local communities. Firstly, there is the 'anglo elite' which causes 'everything [to be] swept aside and away ... submerging people like us' (*The Harbour*

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<sup>4</sup> In 1988 Couani and Sneja Gunew edited a collection of experimental women's writing titled *Telling Ways*, which included multicultural writers. In the 1980s Couani's work was being taken up by multicultural theorists such as Gunew who included Couani in her 1983 and 1988 articles on multicultural writers. In 1988 Gunew published an anthology of multicultural women's writing titled *Beyond the Echo*. Although Couani's work was not represented in the anthology it was dedicated to her (along with two other women) as a 'pioneer' (of multicultural women's writing).

*Breathes*, 29\*). Secondly they experience ‘wave upon wave of americana’ which ‘battered [us] with information’ and ‘cut [us] off from our own cultures’ (21\*). This produces a sense of separation and atomisation:

Through the window we stare at the separate roofs, the separate backyards, the separate fences, the separate shops, the separate street light, the separate streets, the separate factories. Separate. Separate. Separate. (*The Harbour Breathes*, 47\*)

While the text of *The Harbour Breathes* to some extent mourns the transformation of immigrant communities through urbanisation, it is also a testament to the resilience and persistence of these communities, their memories and stories. Although they do not (yet) have the formal status of history, these memories and stories continue to resonate, embedded as they are within the lived fabric of everyday life:

Everything we’ve ever done is busted up. Every token and sign of our activity has been smashed. Our work isn’t tangible or documented but it’s been done and it’s taking effect. (*The Harbour Breathes*, 21\*)

These memories and stories survive and ‘take effect’ through the urban practices of everyday life. In the interface and interchange between city and bodies, the flows and events that constitute the community are enacted. As Couani suggests, in *The Harbour Breathes*, ‘the community was containing the changes’ (7\*) and the city itself is figured as an accommodating, bodily and mobile entity; it is old and has memories; it ‘lives and breathes’ (32\*), it ‘has feelings’ (11\*), it ‘folds us in / opens up a space to rest’ (29\*). The fold is an important metaphor here for the generative relationship between body and city: ‘our history shapes us / in the fold’ (27\*). The city is not ‘just geography’ (31\*) but ‘our lives ... softly colliding’ (31\*). So the bodily memories of the interface between city and people are constantly recuperated in the practices of the everyday despite their elision by the discourses of pedagogical nationalism.

Once again, Couani's narrator foregrounds the role of description in the literary enterprise of mapping the urban quotidian, insisting that 'description is my anchor' (*The Harbour Breathes*, 35\*). In everyday life 'big moments ... pass by ungrasped' (44\*) and it is the simple things, the 'collection[s] of objects' (48\*) that are the site of our 'absorption' in the everyday:

The vastness of the sky, the smallness of the city. The small dot on the map of the world. The seething self-absorption of this microdot. Our world – a few streets, some buildings, a couple of trees and bushes, a small group of people, some machinery, a collection of objects. (*The Harbour Breathes*, 48\*)

As in her other work, first-person narration is deployed in *The Harbour Breathes*. Couani is apparently critical of this mode of narration, stating that:

That's ancient history to me now, that personal approach to writing.  
Now I like to write about the things happening around me not to me.  
(*The Harbour Breathes*, 416\*)

However, given that the piece these lines are drawn from is much concerned with the 'ancient' (and, for example, its distinction from the 'old'), it is possible to read the description 'ancient history' as a comment on the embeddedness of the rhetoric of the personalised self within literature and its persistent discursive reproduction. Couani uses the first-person narrator in various different pieces throughout *The Harbour Breathes* so in spite of her apparent ambivalence it is clear that she considers that it can still do useful literary work. I have argued that in her earlier work she constantly undermines notions of a humanist self. Even the first-person self is seen as emphatically textual rather than self-evident, unmediated or identical to itself. In this way her work foregrounds the constructedness of identity and the post-romantic idea of an unstable, fragmentary subjectivity. The first-person narrators shift

even within one piece of writing as indeed they do throughout *The Harbour Breathes*, where the first-person narrator, as Scott McQuire (1989) comments, is 'never singular' (17).

Moreover in the specific detail of their lives and conversations the first-person narrators are embodied and contextualised: the site of the enactment of social relations and power asymmetries. In the insertion of the body, through description, into the text, Couani emphasises Colebrook's point that the body is not reducible to 'an intentional subjectivity': it is 'an assemblage ... of competing [racialized and gendered] affects and powers' (703). The fragmentary and partial maps of subjectivity that these interrupted, discontinuous narratives present to us, indicate the immediate, incomplete and dynamic nature of the body and the reversible nature of its relations with its urban environments in its performances of everyday life.

*The Harbour Breathes* received about a dozen reviews. There were the usual complaints, for example when reviewer Freda Freiberg (1990), in *Agenda*, commented that Couani's text was 'banal' and 'obscure' (31) – an interesting combination! Generally, however, the book met with acclaim. Scott McQuire described it as 'a remarkable and innovative experiment' (16). It received two substantial review-articles – by McQuire (1989) and Hatzimanolis (1995). Generally, many reviewers were still puzzling over the nature of Couani's project and a number were uncomfortable about the lack of a clearly delineated relationship between the visual images and the text (for example, Strauss and Raines). McQuire describes the cross-generic nature of the book most usefully, saying that it 'resists easy classification' and 'actively fashions a new textual space for itself' (17).

In her radical poetics of the urban quotidian, a poetics which foregrounds the racialized and gendered projects of nationalism, Couani's work redraws the boundaries of the field of Australian literature. In particular it interrupts the stereotyping, in the 1970s and 1980s, of multicultural writing as unmediated speech, as Gunew has argued (see

1983, 1986, 1990 and 1994). Hatzimanolis similarly suggests that Couani's writing and practice as a small publisher crucially raises issues of 'ethnic women's material and discursive access to the category "authorship"' (91).

This stereotyping has reserved the category of aesthetics for Anglo-centric writing and relegated multicultural writing to that of sociology and history, as Gunew argues. Couani's self-reflexively literary project, as I suggest, directly intervenes in this taxonomy of Australian literature. If Couani has characterised herself as a marginalised writer (Brooks and Walker, 30–31), this marginalisation is produced both by her racialized, political and gendered 'otherness' but also by her experimentalism as a writer. I have commented upon the frequently hostile or puzzled reception of her work. Many critics and reviewers, when assessing Couani's work, admit to a certain 'difficulty' in reading it. This is without exception seen as a failing. For some, any disturbance or challenge to conventional reading habits is registered as aggressive and anti-social. For example, one reviewer, Helen Daniel (1988), of *Telling Ways* (1988), a collection of experimental women's writing which Couani edited with Sneja Gunew, regrets that 'respect for the reader' – which for her is 'a fundamental courtesy of good writing' (10) – has gone by the wayside.

It is interesting to trace in the anxiety of these remarks the disturbance Couani's work produces both within the aesthetic domain, and, by extension, within the public sphere of national memories and futures. We could characterise Couani's literary subjectivity as that of an anti-assimilationist 'non-Anglo' writer. One of the problems with the label 'non-Anglo' is, however, as Gunew (1992) suggests, its negative definition. She argues instead for imagining 'cultural difference in a non-binary manner' (1992, 45). Despite the fact that Couani herself commonly used the term, she has also made the comment that her own marginalised position is 'informed by a number of different threads, more complex than Anglo or non-Anglo' (1992, 98). There are two issues here. Firstly that there are convergences and divergences which link

different racialized groups in configurations outside the narrow Anglo/non-Anglo binary. Secondly, there are cultural representations other than race which come to bear on subject- and identity-formation (for example: class, religion, generation, gender, sexual preference, region, political persuasion etc.). Perhaps one way to imagine this multiplicity of difference is in Couani's remark in *The Harbour Breathes* that Sydney is a 'middle eastern city' (16\*). In this simple statement we can see that Sydney is simultaneously many different things for many different people; that it is characterised by the co-presence of a spectrum of pasts and futures. These pasts and futures of course do not exist in a state of benign harmony, however. As *The Harbour Breathes* demonstrates, the city is a site of contestation.

Anna Couani, I have suggested, is a writer whose work throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was often met with incomprehension. (Her most recent work is an ongoing serial internet novel, *The Western Horizon*). In many ways the literary and academic community during this period did not have the critical tools to evaluate her experimental poetics. During the late 1980s and 1990s there was a slow but sustained development of a more productive interest in her work, which resonated with the concerns of contemporary literary and cultural theory and with feminist theory. Issues that I have identified in this article are gendered everyday life, the body and a post-humanist, post-romantic subjectivity. These textual strategies and interests as elaborated in Couani's work, I suggest, disrupt pedagogic discourses of national homogeneity and unification. They portray the nation as a decentred, pluralistic site of competing histories.

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