

Still She Dances

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1835 - George Augustus Robinson observes Towterer and Wongerneep's infant child – 'Mary' – most likely Mathinna.

1837 - Towterer dies; Wongerneep marries Palle.

1840 - Wongerneep dies.

1841 - Mathinna now at Government House.

1843 - Franklins leave Tasmania.

1844 - Mathinna returned to Flinders Island.

1851 - Mathinna – now fifteen – Removed to Oyster Cove.

1852 - Oyster Cove: 'Aminia' – an Aborigine woman – dies after falling, drunk, her face in a puddle. Possibly Mathinna.

1857 - Oyster Cove: unnamed Aborigine dies of unspecified cause. Possibly Mathinna.

1839 - Timemernidic, an Aborigine boy, arrives at Government House, Hobart.

1839/1840 - Timemernidic returned to Flinders Island.

1842 - Franklins meet Timemernidic – now twelve – working on a ship. Last known record states he joined a ship sailing for England.

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long laid to rest

Is not this our time?

Our vessels sail, *She turns*
 each darkened *and twists* corner mapp'd;
and always leaves a trace

and modern man *Time explodes* embraces those
 for whom *from the dirt she kicks*
 so long *Spins and wind snatches a name from off your lips*

A voice come close, whispers this fortitude has lack'd.
'Here I danced, here I breathed,
and here it is I still exist.'

Four Orphans

i. Mary

It was written someplace.
 My mother's song rose up in smoke.
 I saw her dance off the hill-top,
 twist and dive into sky.
 Maybe she found my father there?
 His story wrapped me in stars,
 but I fell from the folds of Dreamtime,
 into whitefella time.
 I didn't know things could die, see?
 For a while,
 I remembered where my family was.

ii. Mathinna

I was born in a red dress,
 with my feet chopped off.
 But my feet were still there!
 So I danced.
 They told me not to dance that way,
 so I stopped.
 They taught me to write,
 so I learnt my name,
 and wrote to my four fathers
 – the two in the sky,
 and the two on the ground.
 Signed, *Mathinna*.
 No replies.

And sometimes they sat at the fire,
Dreamt with me.

But long time I forgot,
they didn't come,
and whitefella makes fire in a box,
not under sky,
puts everything in a box,
and they can't get in
– those people –
they sing a name I forget,
and can't get in.

iii. Leda

She was born in black feathers,
black like me.
So whitefella wrote her story
on my skin,
and said Zeus was my lover
and my father.

The seal-women asked me to dance,
and I said, 'I have no feet!'
But they said, 'You do!' And I did!
So I danced the devil dance,
because the devil is a whitefella,
and God is a whitefella,

'Be good...'

and I was good,

and I was a clever girl,

and I wore shoes,

and that pretty red dress,

– but I danced!

Is that why they've gone?

Where did the sister go?

Where did the mother go?

Did I dance them away?

And all my fathers too?

So cut off my feet,

and write to no one.

iv. Aminia

One day, I saw the sun in my blood,
and remembered a story.

One night, I danced 'til I Dreamed,
and remembered a song.

And now, I don't pass over the
ground,
but touch, and see,
and move through it.
Feel where the scratches are,
cracked skin stretching to breathe.
Curving, carving mass,

and two of my fathers were
whitefellas.

I danced,
and the seal-women painted over
the story on my skin.
'You are not Leda – who are you?'
They asked,
'Who is your mother?'

'I had two', I said.

They asked,
'Who is your father?'

'I had four', I said.

They asked,
'Where are they?'

'Gone', I said.

with gifts, and danger,
and cunning, and pools
– deep pools –
cups in the flesh.

If I lie in the dirt now,
I feel no barriers here.
I curl up into myself.
I lie in my own caress.

One night, I thought to Dream.
I remembered the names of
ancestors.

Perhaps,
I lay down in the mud
to get a closer look at them?

Perhaps,
I stopped too long to embrace
myself?

What crawls on me now
carries me back into myself,
piece by loving piece.

If I go back into the Dream,
I might find them all there.
The pieces.
My mother.
My father.

Timemernidic Paints

Colour loss.

Is it purple,
like moonlight
cupping the face of a boy whose fear has gone numb,
long since severed from the people who would call him home?

Is it brown,
like skin suffuse with sun,
like limbs that weave themselves through grass
searching for song-lines and cockatoos?

Is it blue and gray,
like waves that mimic the heavens,
'til savagely they whip their tails
and refuse to be placated?

Like the murmur in his dream,
the shimmering air that voices weave,
the skin of time and space stretched thin,
the porous canvas calls,
and Timemernidic lifts his brush to paint.

The Experiments

diamonds from coal
 parroted propaganda
 if, if, and then...
 to name, to claim, to fence
 is civilisation
 to fetter
 to better
 to bind
 to box, and label, and list,
 legitimate ascension

gold-plate bronze mind
 fine English lustre
 parroted pleases
 thank yous
 and bind my feet
 so I can't run
 and write me down
 so I am words
 caught and punctuated
 in your study

vague veneer of pleasure
 distant interest
 in unanticipated progress
 the pet project
 promise salvation
 civil savage
 if, if, and then...
 and if it fails
 – *it* –
 box it up, ship it out,
 box it in, shut it up,
 and start afresh

don't dwell
 on failings.

Wanting

Took away the frame
and freed my feet,
so I stepped through.

Crying for Mathinna,
I heard the voices
that read the dead,
and stepped through.

Because you don't know my story, you make me a myth.
Prized open my body, and made me fuck for pennies and bread.
Gave me the pox, but couldn't give me a voice.

When you gazed upon my portrait,
was your first thought to rape me?

I woke in the Dreaming
to find Leda's story written all over me,
 from the place of no place, of all places,
 from the time of no time and all time,
I woke, and found myself defined,
defiled,
written over.

Towterer; Palle; Franklin; God;
 four fathers left me.
Was that not spectacle enough for sympathy?

But you would dig up the civilised savage
and have me dance for show.

Dig up the legend
and scratch your hunger on my bones.

Bind my body to myths,
and feed my father swans.

But you better watch what you eat
when you go hunting cannibals.

Saviour Complex

Drowning in the beat of the heart's sorrow
– in the beat of the sorrow.
Legacy
– drummed in the veins.

Forgive us our fathers
– trespassers.
Applaud my humble abdication,
I renounce my guilt-gold crown.
See my humility shine!
Isn't it splendid? It's yours!

Listen, as I hi-jack your voice.
Humble me (*praise me*)
Humble me (*praise me*).
Lay me down to sleep upon your bodies
– soft and black –
as I dream of silencing your mothers.

Author's Note

According to its author, Richard Flanagan's finely crafted novel *Wanting* (2008) is not a historical novel, but rather a story about desire and its dangers (see Steger 2008: n.p.). However, given its reliance upon historical figures and the novel's depiction of the traumatic outcome of nineteenth-century colonialism on Indigenous Tasmanians, it is virtually impossible to disentangle the text from its historical bases. As such, Flanagan's narrative evinces some problematic elements, to which the poems of *Still She Dances* respond.

It is important to note that Flanagan is a supporter and advocate of Aborigine rights, and the publication of *Wanting* coincided with the Australian Government's 2008 apology to the Aborigine population for the historical injustices enacted upon them (see 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples' 2008). As such, Flanagan's novel illustrates the nature of these injustices at a time when discourse surrounding the topic would have been prominent in the national consciousness. His sympathetic yet troubling portrayal of Mathinna creates an empathetic response in the reader, which is left unsettled and unresolved by her neglect and death. Arguably, this reflects the unfinished nature of Aboriginal trauma. However, as Rohan Wilson points out, Flanagan's narrative – via Mathinna's premature death – also “perpetuate[s] extinction as a legitimate way of describing the plight of the Aboriginal Tasmanians” (Wilson 2015: 8, see also Johnson 2014). In Flanagan's narrative, Mathinna is twice orphaned (through the death of her parents and her abandonment by her adoptive parents, Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin, upon their return to England), sexually assaulted, and subsequently descends into prostitution and alcoholism. From the reader's perspective there is a sense of inevitability to Mathinna's demise (and by extension, that of Indigenous Tasmanians in general) that parallels the colonial extinctionist discourse of the nineteenth century, and which was employed, in part at least, to justify colonisation. Compounding this is the fact that Flanagan avoids giving Mathinna a first-person voice. As such, although the narrative exposes the trauma of colonisation and genocide, Mathinna's subjectivity, in comparison to the white Western characters remains peripheral, as she is marginalised once again.

Through the poems, I have attempted to disrupt the colonial voice, to open up a space for Mathinna to speak more directly to the reader. In this regard, the title-poem ‘Still She Dances’ provides a gateway through which Mathinna’s voice might enter. The (italicised) voice that interjects and disrupts the colonial speaker here is not specifically intended to be Mathinna’s, but rather a disembodied voice that emanates from the landscape itself and *invokes* Mathinna. One of the strengths of Flanagan’s novel is the connection he makes between Mathinna and the natural world in a manner that resists mere novelty, instead drawing our attention to the intimate relationship between Indigenous Tasmanians and their surroundings (such as our initial encounter with her as she runs through the grass). The poems attempt to draw on this relationship and unite it with a non-linear sense of time more in tune with the holistic approach of Aborigine culture to place, epistemology, and ontology, inspired in part by Diana James’s examination of ‘Tjukurpa Time’ or the Dreaming (see James 2015).

In a sense, part of what the poems do is to flesh out this non-linear temporality, which Flanagan makes use of but never quite seems to push to its full potential. *Wanting*’s structure plays with historical temporality by paralleling the two narratives following Mathinna and Charles Dickens. The novel is constructed so that each narrative disrupts the other as Flanagan alternates between them. Furthermore, Mathinna seems at times to haunt Dickens’s narrative (as when Lady Jane Franklin imagines Mathinna tugging at her dress during her initial meeting with Dickens). Catherine Lanone notes that Flanagan’s “paradoxical biofiction engages with the present while being haunted by the past” (Lanone forthcoming), suggesting a kind of double haunting – Mathinna as a figure that (on occasions) haunts Dickens’s narrative, and the spectre of colonialism, raised by *Wanting*, which threatens to infiltrate our own present. However, though Mathinna haunts Flanagan’s novel, she never seems to entirely break through, and the sense of fatal inevitability that permeates her short life remains unshakeable, while her voice (as well as her disruptive potential) is swallowed up amongst those of the colonists: ‘The Protector’ (i.e. George Augustus Robinson, who goes unnamed in the novel), Sir John Franklin, and Lady Jane. As such, the disembodied voice of ‘Still She Dances’, twisting and turning, is intended to be more resistant and insidious – a persistent whisper reaching through the temporal cracks of our cultural (post-/colonial)

memory. Rather than setting the scene for a haunting, it opens up a space of greater confrontation and conflict – a face-to-face encounter with Mathinna, one in which she might address us directly. In addition, both the sense of a non-linear temporality and the disruptive sense of movement help to establish the themes of Dreaming and dancing, a correlation also noted by Lanone (see Lanone forthcoming), which recur throughout the poems.

As a historical figure, whose image and/or cultural myth has been appropriated many times in various mediums, Mathinna has had numerous identities inscribed upon her. These too I have sought to disrupt, allowing her, in a sense, to reclaim her ambiguity, and through that, a sense of self and agency, however tentative. This occurs most notably in ‘Four Orphans’. It cannot – indeed, must not – be overlooked that in attempting to provide Mathinna with space to speak, I too am performing an act of appropriation. With this in mind, ‘Four Orphans’ is structured around four of the identities inscribed upon the historical Mathinna, drawn not only from Flanagan’s novel, but also historical sources cited in the work of Alison Alexander’s *The Ambitions of Jane Franklin: Victorian Lady Adventurer* (2013) and Penny Russell’s ‘Girl in a Red Dress: Inventions of Mathinna’ (2012). The intention here is to give each version of Mathinna space to speak in the first-person voice, while simultaneously allowing the multiplicity of voices to undermine the appropriative act by creating a sense of ambiguity. Furthermore, though the poem disrupts the appropriative act, it still draws attention to Mathinna’s (twice) orphaned status – one of the few aspects of the historical Mathinna’s life (and trauma) that we can attest to with any amount of certainty. Though it may not be possible to determine whether or not the death of her biological parents was a direct result of colonialism, it certainly played a significant factor in her subsequent adoption and abandonment by the Franklins. It could be argued that Flanagan’s decision not to give Mathinna a fully-fledged, first-person narrative voice is perhaps an attempt to avoid, or at least limit, the appropriative act in his novel. However, such restraint is problematised by his depiction of the sexual assaults upon Mathinna (a point to which I will return), for which there is no historical evidence.

Crucially, Flanagan’s novel also ignores two other historical figures. One is Sir John’s daughter, Eleanor, who took responsibility for Mathinna’s education and is the source of the only surviving ‘document’ in Mathinna’s voice, a letter to her father Towterer (or Towgerer), albeit only in

transcribed form, since the letter, cited in adapted form in *Wanting*, was transcribed in Eleanor's diary. The other absence or omission – more interesting to me – is Timemernidic, an Aborigine boy, and the first recipient of Lady Jane's attempts to 'civilise' the 'natives'. There are no infamous portraits of Timemernidic, akin to that of Mathinna which inspired Flanagan's novel, and scant information regarding his fate. Hence 'Timemernidic Paints', in one sense, attempts to paint him back into the picture, and into cultural memory. My biofictional figure draws inspiration from the anthropological work of Lorraine Gibson, from Lynette Russell's analysis of the resistance and survival of Aborigine women in the Bass Strait and Kangaroo islands (the 'seal-women' of 'Four Orphans'), and, again, from Diana James's work on 'Tjukurpa Time' (see Gibson 2013, Russell 2007, and James 2015). In light of these scholars' work, the Timemernidic who paints could also be interpreted as a contemporary Aborigine or mixed-race descendent of Indigenous Tasmanians, who dreams of his historical namesake (the theme of dreaming here creates a sense of ambiguity – a questioning of what is or is not real and true – which once again is important in subverting the appropriative act). In any case, these figures are a response to Flanagan's novel's failure to acknowledge Tasmanian Aborigine survival, and the somewhat essentialist implications that mixed-race descendants of Aborigine Tasmanians and white settlers are 'less' Aboriginal. Again, these issues are symptomatic of a trauma that Flanagan's extinctionist narrative perhaps too simplistically fixes in the past. Curiously, Flanagan *does* discuss the survival of the Aborigine women of the Bass Strait and Kangaroo islands, and the complex nature of claims to Aboriginal heritage, in a 2002 article (see Flanagan 2002). Perhaps Flanagan decided that to make a more prominent acknowledgment of Aborigine survival in *Wanting* would have undermined the use of Mathinna's narrative to demonstrate the historical cruelties and injustices meted out by Tasmania's colonisers. However, if this were the case, it still returns us to the uncomfortable position of summing up the fate of the Indigenous Tasmanians through a discourse of extinction.

Arguably, however, the novel's most controversial element for both *Wanting*'s readers and critics is Mathinna's rape. Flanagan perpetuates what one might term a culturally insidious trauma: the use of women's bodies and rape as spectacle, in a way that does little to give agency, or a sense of justice or redress, to rape survivors, fictional or otherwise. Inscribing

Mathinna within the Western myth of Leda seems to me to be another way of defining her fate and rendering her rape and murder inevitable: Mathinna as voiceless Other; as Leda; as palimpsest of colonial desire. The penultimate poem ‘Wanting’, then, serves as a kind of metafictional portal, through which Mathinna speaks directly back to Flanagan as her biofictional ‘author’. As Wendy Hesford states, in “order to rewrite the rape story from one of sex and desire” – recall that Flanagan’s novel is supposedly one of desire – “to one of power and gender”, we have “to debunk the myths” – i.e. Leda inscribed upon and ‘overwriting’ Mathinna – to instead “create a new history and a new political plot” (Hesford 1999: 203).

Finally, returning to the problematic nature of appropriating Mathinna’s (not to mention Timemernidic’s) voice and myth, the closing poem ‘Saviour Complex’ re-directs the reader’s gaze back toward the author (myself, that is, rather than Flanagan). With this poem I wanted to deliberately draw attention to the appropriative act, and the process of speaking for those who can no longer speak for themselves. While bringing the oft-neglected nature of colonial injustice and genocide to a wider audience is a commendable act, there remains a somewhat disconcerting aura to the knowledge that such an act potentially accrues professional recognition and/or progression (be it creative, academic, or otherwise) for its author – particularly if the author is already an inheritor of the historical advantages bestowed upon white Westerners by colonialism. By this I do not mean to suggest that Flanagan’s aim was to seek accolades for writing about the impact of colonialism upon Indigenous Tasmanians. Rather, more simply, I mean to remind the reader of the question of an author’s intentions, and to what extent these may or may not justify, or indeed (in)validate, the appropriative act. To this end, ‘Saviour Complex’ is not intended as an apologetic or sentimental platitude, but rather as a deliberately uncomfortable read, because reading colonialism should not be comfortable; reading genocide should not be comfortable; reading rape should not be comfortable. Too often we consign acts of nineteenth-century colonial trauma to the past in a manner that dismisses or diminishes the consequences, the acts of resistance, the violent tremors and after-effects that continue to reverberate into the present. Where the fictional or poetic is also historical and biographical, there is an ethical obligation on both the author and reader to accept and bear a weight of responsibility.

Acknowledgement

What little I uncovered about Timemernidic has been gleaned from Alison Alexander's excellent biography *The Ambitions of Jane Franklin: Victorian Lady Adventurer* (2013).

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