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MASTER'S TOOLS, MASTER'S HOUSE

All the old crimes

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Context

The attention being paid to the progression of the Covid-19 pandemic, the environmental destruction caused by changing climate, and the economic challenges of poverty and the obsessive drive to development, are all providing a cover to hide another social disaster. Audre Lorde famously said in 1979:

those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference — those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older — know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde 1984: 112)

Women and other LGBTIQ persons are not only not making progress but are actually losing ground and hardgotten gains made earlier in the struggle to bring about genuine equality in gender relations. Religious dogma, political misogyny, masculine privilege, anti-gay and trans violence and abuse are all being used to pull back on the right of everyone to assert and determine their own social-legal recognition and expression.

According to the UN Office Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner:

lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people may be particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic ...LGBTI people regularly experience stigma and discrimination while seeking health services ... Laws that criminalize same sex relations or that target trans persons due to their gender identity or expression, exacerbate negative health outcomes for LGBTI people, as they may not access healthcare services for fear of arrest or violence ... This discrimination can elevate the risk for LGBTI people from COVID-19. (UN OHCHR 2020)

This report goes on to discuss stigmatisation, discrimination, hate speech and attacks on the LGBTI

community, suggesting 'an increase in homophobic and transphobic rhetoric ... there are also reports of police using COVID-19 directives to attack and target LGBTI organizations ...' (UN OHCHR 2020).

Reports in national Australian news outlets throughout the period of March through to August 2020 raise the issue of an increase in domestic/family violence during the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Anthony Galloway writes, in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

Almost one in 10 Australian women in a relationship have experienced domestic violence during the coronavirus crisis, with two-thirds saying the attacks started or became worse during the pandemic. A survey by the Australian Institute of Criminology also reveals more than half of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence before the COVID-19 crisis said the violence had become more frequent or severe since the start of the pandemic' (Galloway 2020)

Tammy Mills writes, in *The Age*: 'More women are coming forward for the first time to report family violence, according to Victorian research that shows COVID-19 lockdowns have worsened the potential for abuse in many homes' (Mills 2020). Past Prime Minister Julia Gillard noted the impact on girls and women imposed by the deep structural changes to the economy caused by the measures required to manage the health impacts of the pandemic. The exposure of significant rifts in gender parity in education, work, salaries and management power all show up 'risks to hard-won gains for women' and that 'businesses under the pump might say to themselves that the investments they were making in diversity, including gender diversity, now look like a luxury' (Whyte 2020).

The structures of the social and political order are against us, and while a narrative movement in poetry may *temporarily* beat the dominant masculine-controlled discourses of both poetics using its own internal forms, and the strictures of wider social discourses which have been built and are controlled by the masculine, this will never enable us to bring about genuine change unless we subvert both poetic and social forms for our own use. That is, while we may want to use the poetic forms available to us to narrate/tell our stories, in wrestling with the politics borne of our own subjectivities we find that poetry is more than poetry. Gendered politics and the politics of gender — that is, the stories we hear rarely in poetry — have been criticised for disturbing the traditional establishment. For example, as early as 1964, critics responds to Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 1964 poem, 'We are going', (Noonuccal 1964: 25) that they were disturbed by the activism of the poems, and described them as 'propaganda rather than poetry'; but Noonuccal herself embraced the idea of poetry as propaganda' (Rooney 2009: 68—70).

We must **write to create new structures** which dismantle the political and social thinking which has condoned and supported the violence of men against women, children, lesbians, trans, intersex and anyone presenting as queer.

Fundamental to this creation of new structures is **deconstructing** the basic conservative building block of gender relations which, for Judith Butler, is that:

in the liberal individualist way of thinking, the individual is always an adult male in his prime, who, just at this particular moment when we encounter him, happens to have no needs and

dependencies that would bind him to others. (Gessen 2020)

which leads to the thinking that some lives are considered more worthy of public recognition than others.

And it is this social structure that requires us to **build politics into the form or structure** of the poem. Toni Morrison exhorts us: 'in times of dread ... never choose to remain silent ... refuse to succumb to (the) malevolence (of the world)' (Morrison 2015). This means that legitimate content for our poetry may consist of challenges to the status quo, the picking apart the politics and power ratios of gender.

In this work of deconstruction, **we should not accept being constrained by so-called purity of form**. For example, in the submission guidelines for *Atlas Poetica a journal of world tanka*, editor M Kei says: 'We are interested in both traditional and innovative verse of high quality and all serious attempts to assimilate [other] genres into a continuously developing English tradition of tanka literature' (Kei Books n.d.). In our imagining and use of newly created and hybrid forms for writing our politics, we should **not be afraid of the old masculinities that sit in judgement** to say that what we are writing and performing is not poetry.

In this, I am not writing a 'hate men' polemic, but writing against aggressive, misogynistic masculinities as they are expressed in misogyny. It is important to not confuse 'men' as a gender with the aggressive masculinity of poetry by and about men, enacting the oppression of the hegemony, and which often is not nuanced enough to express the realities of trans and the feminine. Consider, for example, 'Howl', the famous poem by wellknown Beat generation poet Allen Ginsberg, was subject to an obscenity trial in 1957, as it described heterosexual and homosexual sex at a time when homosexual acts were a crime. While the poem was not ruled obscene in law on the basis of freedom of speech and addressing a current legal issue of life and death, it is a poem written by a man for men, and is exclusive of any sensibilities other than the dominance of the masculine, be it homosexual or heterosexual (Ginsberg 1984; Wallenfeldt n.d.).

Aggressive masculinity is still being given a free pass by a masculinised legal system in 2019. Causing a bitter debate over religion and homosexuality, in 2019 Australian footballer Israel Folau posted a screenshot of a meme, quoting Christian Bible verses *1 Corinthians 6:9-10*:

*WARNING Drunks, Homosexuals, Adulterers, Liars, Fornicators, Thieves, Atheists, Idolators
HELL AWAITS YOU. REPENT!* (Patrick 2019)

Far from being denied the right to express his religious beliefs Folau was not sanctioned by the court, despite the risk that the post would contribute to an anti-gay stigma that could lead to violence, especially against young people.

We should be prepared, in our writing to take on and hold up to scrutiny all the old crimes. The old crimes that are built on the old words that are used in the old, agreed and acceptable ways. We can do this, and our poetry can be the form and the vehicle, making the form serve the politics. And we can be our own judges of what crimes it is critical we address, and in what ways we do it.

Exposing the bones of misogyny is what we are about. Keeping an eye on gendered violence as the Covid-19 pandemic absorbs all of our attention and energy is what we need to do.

Forms of language, as well as specific words, provide a way to reconfigure the dominant discourse, subvert the power of its formally constructed argument and justification for misogyny and gender construction. The words we use and the ways we use them are the tools for challenging or disrupting, to dismantle the master's house.

Caroline Ramsey suggests that 'poetry provides an arena where self and other can clearly construct meaning in relation, then we are offered an active space for coordination' (Ramsey 2006: 16). Ramsey seems to offer poetry as a medium for dialogue which reciprocally reframes the meaning at the same time as creating the form in which the meaning is delivered. For example, the closed and ordered form of the sestina can be used to represent the restrictive and punitive social order that controls us all, reducing the uncontested power of the radical-right hate speech. And other traditional forms, such as triolet and tanka, can be used to say things they have never before been allowed to say. Jeanine Rogers argues that Elizabeth Bishop:

used the sestina form itself to explore the powerful feelings that we have around the issue of heredity, especially regarding inherited diseases like mental illness. Her choice of form is significant not only because of the sestina's intrinsic references to repetition and circularity, important ideas in a discussion of heredity, but also because of the form's resemblances to the double helix structure of the DNA molecule (Rogers 2010: 94).

The poems in 'Master's tools, master's house: all the old crimes' use the subverting of a range of traditional poetry forms to lay bare some of the gaping faultlines of gender relations, especially as they are experienced by LGBTIQ communities. 'Slippery slope' uses the sestina form to highlight complaint, duress, deprivation. 'Imaginings' uses triolet to focus time and events, coupled with prose triplets using repetition for emphasis. 'Speaking bluntly' uses tanka in opposition to the usual requirements of subtle suggestion and dreaming room, and eschewing the commonly accepted tanka themes of love, loss and longing. 'Minutes global summit' uses irony in minuting the high-level meetings in male preserves of formalised power. 'Love is love' uses triolet to riff on the words of the master of master's house builders, Ludwig Wittgenstein. [1]

All the old crimes

I

All the old crimes, all the old violence continues.

Amid that violence and those crimes, what do we owe those with whom we share the Earth?

And, chronicling the crimes and violence against us and the Earth, what do we do with our rage?

Imaginings rise upon themselves

in 2020 the plague has come
 skin cracked and bleeding from washing hands
 borders closed (it's hard on some)
 in 2020 the plague has come
 jobs and hospitals stopped being fun
 kissing and weddings completely banned
 in 2020 the plague has come
 skin cracked and bleeding from washing hands

do your best to do without irony and report honestly on the distance of social reality
 imaginings rise upon themselves
 Lombardy the largest manufacturer of nasal swabs, Hubei manufactured medical masks

do your best to do without trust and belief in politicians who eschew science
 imaginings rise upon themselves
 make the best of a bad job, triage those who know history, economics over health

do your best to do without touch and the close breath of friends and lovers
 imaginings rise upon themselves
 remember what we know, that we stood on the side of good, loved where we could

Slippery slope in the age of queer complicated by a viral pandemic

New meaning for vulnerability
 is locked down by deciding
 fear will definitely go viral,
 not only, this time, of queer,
 but all those deemed expendable
 in a world gripped by pandemic.

Fear inherent in pandemic,
 attaches vulnerability
 to elderly expendable,
 as well as in deciding
 that those we know as queer
 don't warrant PPE for viral

immunity. Fear spirals, viral
 escalation to pandemic ...
 and, what's really queer as queer,
 is supply chain vulnerability,
 which helps Government in deciding

just who will be expendable.

Health is subverted and expendable
as Recovery goes viral,
the Economy deciding
who loses to the pandemic —
elderly vulnerability
those who live in poverty, queers

in service industries. Queer
is definitely expendable,
a special vulnerability,
as infectious hate spills viral,
homophobia is pandemic.
Racism, misogyny, deciding ...

A slippery slope, deciding
who lives or dies, women, queers,
bashed and killed in this pandemic,
all our lives expendable,
hidden in the lockdown, viral
violence and vulnerability.

Monied power says who is expendable
in the age of queer and viral,
pandemic vulnerability.

II

no gods, no masters
anarchy appropriated
woman battered, ask her
if, no gods, no masters,
he's any more than just a gangster,
violence for free and hatred —
no gods, no masters
anarchy appropriated

speaking bluntly
asking the woman next door
are you ok?
we heard the bashing
violence carries

Lost ground: mapping feminist retribution

Part 1 Journey

a bus driving off the mountain road is of no concern to me
 if we take it on face value it is just a road, just a bus
 in the aftermath, the second wave is nothing it could happen again, but then
 as the hours close, appears not seemly, but silenced —
 I hold what is known close, under my elbow, secured, lament for lost change
 weep for bygone chances claim a window seat for all the desperate dreams of rescue
 she stands on the broken road to nowhere. I rest uncomfortably at the bottom of the cliff
 we both put our hands in crocodile water, planning to steal, intending to take it all down

Part 2 Catalyst

See this!!!!

identity is conjecture, a yobbo in a café messing with civility 'what are ya?'
 cross-dressing girl/boy looking for androgyny counters with repartee no departee

'who wants to know?' this exchange ends in tears, tattoos are no protective skin
 no defence against the carnage caused in the hegemony

by flaunting the confusion of taunting turned back on him
 stand up to him

Part 3 Takedown

at this moment I cannot believe in heroes. his masculinity is toxic.
 what matters to him is on the ropes
 so was it her, or any of the multitude of sisters? Or was it me who took him down?
 though I do believe in the rule of law, I believe in justice more,
 and retribution, and the deliciousness of schadenfreude, and revenge
 a 'good man', a 'man's man'
 but a bully, misogynist, murderer
 and dead

III

The apocalypse will be a slow burn with scorching air for five dry years and one catastrophic summer. We will crave the spray from a garden hose, shock of cold water on skin, and enough water to pour our mouths full and spill over our throats and shirt fronts. Instead, our lungs will fill with smoke and spinning dust eddies as the western sand heaps our gardens into dunes. Today the living flames consume the living earth, spread, blacken maps, evidence of apocalypse, as if black, from now, is the new green, fear is rage, flames suck all life, all moisture from leaf cells and blood cells.

Molecules melt, heat transforms metal to molten. Above the smoke, sun rises, sets, moon pulls tides, stars flare and die, satellites circle and circle after their death. Looking up all we see is smoke. No fresh air, no breathing space between spikes of heat. Insidious, invidious, day dark haze, cloud and internet lose our messages of hope, connections break, smoke cuts us off from sun and moon,

distorts time. Trust breaks — *how have we have made an enemy of our country?*

There will be green. There will be living bone and blood, DNA continuity, and thinking trees. Insects, seeds, and grasses, pushing through salvaged damp, there will be ...

Emerging like ghosts from smoke, a pony, echidna and wombat. Then a green shoot from damp earth under a tap ...

the year of no enthusiasm where words are lies

look at the situation we have here, a world where words no longer tell us truth, where words are used as tools of abuse, words no longer trusted may be fake news, morality outsourced to sub-contractors then they're stiffed when they argue back

and still, words are all we have ...

these words —

lying, witnesses, votes, politics, acquittal, impeachment, fixer, recusal, loyalty, grifter, profile, criminal, bagman, insurance, hush money, raided, attorney, flip, witch hunt, dishonest, implicated, trashed, warning, protection, consequences, cesspool, conflict of interest, swamp, surveillance, drunk, breeding ground, secrets, staking out, Trump Hotel, money, corruption, private rooms, back rooms, want to be seen, special interest group, influence, bent, cover-up, fit up, facts getting in the way, frame ...

*

it all happened in the year we watched the end of the world, while we agitated for the right to not be offended, the right to vilify and discriminate, destroy the earth, contaminating our water, stirring up our weather

take a step back it all gets more local and less clear ...

emissions flat-lining, costs of inaction, religious voodoo science, climate science is voodoo, blow the place up, meeting and beating targets, link climate change with human activity, spruik the coal industry, international climate talks, global deal, forced migration, cherry pick content, flooded cities, lost island civilisations, vital information, cover-up ,activists, greenie communists, absolute rubbish, climate alarmists, diplomacy, cheaters, climate deny-ers, a piece of coal is your bestie, greenhouse emissions, political pain ,ice caps melting, net zero, climate sceptics, massive renewable energy, export policies, climate refugees, world demand for coal, global warming a substitute religion, energy billionaires, fracking, gas, millions of gallons of water, coal, solar cells, batteries ...

*

the year we looked for heroes to save us, save the bushland, our houses and farms, when we understood each other as heroes, saw courage, through the smoke and flames, before the looting, scams, backstabbing and blame settled in as norms for response to crisis

I've never seen anything like this before ...

ferocious, burning, deadly, threatened areas, dislocated road systems, build-up of heat, temperature

spikes, impenetrable smoke, sacred sites, intensity of fires, active fire ground, blazes, widespread, a lot of country, burn to the ocean, fire breaks, jumping highways, open country, lessen risk, super-dry fuels, Hawaii holiday, drought conditions, lack of moisture, destroyed, tactical back burn, old growth trees, leaf litter, smoke proof bunker, stay with the cattle, move livestock to safety, species extinctions, billions of deaths, 50mm of rain to extinguish, flipped the fire truck, fire makes its own weather, community briefing, evacuation centres, no food or water, fuel stations empty, fuel trucks in evacuation queues, fire trails, front lines, raging

*

look at the situation we have here

Minutes Global Summit March 2020

Attendance: Heads of Famine and Drought; Pandemics (Viral); Fire and Smoke; Flood (Rain, Hail, Lost Water), Damaging Winds (Cyclones) and Pestilence (Locusts)

Apologies: Head of Climate

Agenda: Update on Global Strategy to Cleanse Humans from the Earth

1. The multiple whammy roll-out in 2020 is so-far-so-good.
2. More thought to be given to subduing any allies of Humans e.g. Trees have been supplying paper for surgical supplies and many still survive after the January/February fires (No disrespect intended to Head of Fire)
3. Outline required for disruption of supply chains for soap/detergents/cleaning products (Heads of Flood and Damaging Winds to provide)
4. Head of Pandemics noted that Humans think a bit of a curve is a win for them but we've got history and time on our side.
5. Head of Famine/Drought suggested that if we can keep working together, just this once, we'll have them to rights, especially if the US caves in and relaxes social contact and economic restrictions at Easter. ~~Stupid Easter Bunnies!!!!~~
6. Head of Pandemics noted that the strategy is working well with unmitigated spread on continental land masses BUT islands such as Saint Helena (Napoleon was a Human war leader) and Australia will be untouched if they can manage to keep a 'No arrivals' policy enforced. May need some help to breach their isolation. E.g. it may seem counter-intuitive but if the ocean could be kept unseasonably quiet there is more chance of un-monitored boat arrivals carrying Virus (this could also work for Christmas Island and Nauru).
7. **Next meeting:** Need to at least Skype/Zoom every three days or so to keep up with Humans manoeuvring to outwit the Elements/Gods (they have declared war on both Fire and COVID-19 in the last few months)

Meeting closed to general self-congratulation, much hand-shaking, general embraces and kisses

IV

love is love

and love is queer

I cannot speak thereof.

love is love

and must silent be, whereof

I crave you near

love is love

when love is queer

'too direct, explicit and prose-like, too graphic and telling'

I will refuse to ask forgiveness until

we're not constrained by your misogyny

because we're steel forged by anvil.

I will refuse to ask forgiveness until

though blunt, direct speech, you hear us still,

we can speak our words with honesty

I will refuse to ask forgiveness until

we're not constrained by your misogyny^[ii]

When will we see the men standing up?

don't mess with me

when you use words like 'hate'

don't piss me off with misogyny

don't mess with me

when you argue sick theology

don't give me your homophobic fear, *mate*

don't mess with me

when you use words like 'hate'

when will we see the men standing up ...

or is this our country's best fantasy game?

these things happen. Anyone can be driven to it

ambushing the ones you love

burning them alive

when will we see the men standing up?[iii]

[i] 'Love is love' uses the final statement of Wittgenstein's major work, *Tractatus: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'* (1922: 90, s.7); or see 'Ludwig Wittgenstein', <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/6s.htm> (accessed 14 May 2020).

[ii] In December 2019 during the US election debates candidates were asked if they would rather ask forgiveness or give a gift. All the men said they would give a gift. The two women said they would ask forgiveness for being too direct, too blunt, too forceful, too passionate (Astor 2019). In 1979 Audre Lorde said 'those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women [need to learn] how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde 1984: 112).

[iii] Based on an article in *The Guardian* quoting Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, at a press briefing on 5 December 2019 (Greve 2019).

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Sandra Renew's ongoing project is the interrogation of gender presentation and the LGBTIQAA gender discourses. Her poetry comments on contemporary issues and questions including war, language, environment, climate and the planet's health, translation, border crossings, dissent, gender. Her work is informed by many years working in war zones, in Indigenous communities and on the fringes of heterosexuality. Sandra's new collections are *Acting Like a Girl* (Recent Work Press, 2019); and *The Orlando Files. Poems of Dissent and Social Commentary for Performance* (Ginninderra Press, 2018).

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