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**Beyond the Anonymity Gap: Remaking our Sense of Urban Contemporary in the Australian and New Zealand Context**

**Abstract:**

The anonymity promised by urban environments can be seen to have positive aspects, it is represented as allowing both cosmopolitan diversity and a freedom from surveillance by close family and community. Nigel Krauth and Robyn Sheenan Bright also note a tendency for contemporary authors in Queensland, Australia, to emphasise elements common to urban experience in much of the first world as a way of avoiding stereotype; similar ‘post-identity thinking’ (Welche Ommundson) has been identified in the work of Asian Australian author Alice Pung. Extraordinary levels of urbanisation worldwide however, (United Nations 2007 xi) have led to stark differences in urban experience between the Nigerian megacity represented in Chris Abani’s *Graceland*, Charlotte Grimshaw’s *Auckland and Melbourne* as written by Christos Tsiolkas, for example. As an author writing a non-realist representation of Brisbane I have often been told that the trope of the anonymous and anonymising city is my best hope of engaging non-local readers. This paper will argue that, while this trope certainly has uses, it leaves a large gap in the types of lived experience available for exploration—specific cultural issues and urban landscapes, for example. It will seek strategies for representing specific urban places successfully from the established authors mentioned, consider what their work reveals about contemporary urban experience in their cities and will apply these insights to my manuscript in progress.

**United Nations, *State of the World Population Report 2007:***

<http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/introduction.html>

**Biographical Note:**

Alexandra McCallum is a PhD Creative Writing candidate at Griffith University. Her novel-in-progress is literary fiction with mythic elements and examines the emergence of an entirely new language in Australia. She has co-written two plays for schools touring and four scripts based on youth theatre processes. Her non fiction has been published in *Lowdown* and *Brisbane Modern* magazines. She was selected for at Tin House Writers Workshop 2012 in Portland Oregon USA where she received feedback from Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Harding. She has an interest in the contemporary use of folklore and in best practice models in community cultural development. She presented at the AAWP conference in 2013.

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Romantic representations of urbanisation, which place cities on the negative side of a binary—against either a rural idyll or restorative wilderness—continue to be complicated, extended and critiqued, both by contemporary nature writing and by the many concepts of urban landscapes (Cooke 2007, para 3). While the anonymous nature of cities is a key part of their negative representation in this binary, it has long been seen to have positive elements. Urban dwellers can experience a certain level of anonymity, with freedom from close family and community scrutiny. More recently Nigel Krauth and Robyn Sheehan Bright (2005) noted a tendency for contemporary authors, in Queensland, Australia, to emphasise elements common to urban experience in much of the first world (2). As a fiction author, writing a contemporary non-realist representation of Brisbane, I have become increasingly interested in the roots of positive perceptions of anonymity; and how Charlotte Grimshaw's representation of Auckland and Christos Tsiolkas' representations of Melbourne write against anonymity.

This investigation was initially a response to concerns raised, on a number of occasions, regarding my own project: that no matter the quality of the writing, naming Brisbane in the manuscript would leave me with a project of purely local interest. In contrast, other early readers of my work have been keen to provide reassuring examples from the work of authors, such as Cormac McCarthy, whose local settings did not preclude success; or to argue for the importance of the representation of local experience, whether or not the work enjoys a wider audience.

My aim in this paper is certainly not to compare myself to Cormac McCarthy, or to argue that the trope of the anonymous city is never a useful one. I will argue, however, that in a time of ever-increasing global urbanisation, representing distinctive and specific urban experience, in a way that is open to readers in other places, is becoming more important. In particular, because, as urban living becomes the norm for the majority of the world's population (UN 1 2007), binary representations between the rural and the urban are of secondary importance to distinctions between different types of urban (and indeed rural) environments. This is not just an issue for fictional representation. Urban planner, Elmar Sabelberg (1986), makes a case for more diverse and culturally specific planning templates, in her article on the 'South-Italian City' (59). From a fictional perspective, we can consider the differences between the representations of Melbourne and Auckland that this paper is focused on, with the Nigerian megacities in Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2005). These texts do share certain basic commonalities, for example, all the authors I discuss are caught between the local and the

global in various ways, but the specific life we see in a ‘moldy’ slum (1) is specific to Lagos, and indeed, to Lagos in the 1980s (Dawson 2009, 3).

Identifying the people who raised concerns with me about naming Brisbane in the manuscript does not seem to serve any purpose. For the sake of context, I will say that that they have included academic delegates at the AAWP conference in 2013 and senior staff members at my own institution. I have no doubt that all these people had my best interests in mind, both in the sense of my future professional profile and financial interests. One academic, also a successful author of two books, shared with me her experience at an international book fair where she found it difficult to negotiate international contracts due to the Australian settings of her books. Author and academic Kim Wilkins, who has a particular interest in fantasy fiction by Australian authors, notes that authors have a tendency to promote the image of an international outlook which ‘could be a disingenuous way of glossing over the fact that fantasy fiction’s disavowal of Australian settings is a key factor in its marketability overseas.’ (Wilkins 2008, 9).

The value of anonymity can also be presented as a commercial imperative in film and television. A PhD supported by Brisbane City Council notes that television productions filmed in Brisbane, such as *Fire* and *Medivac* (Davies 2009, 168), can take specific advantage of Brisbane’s relative anonymity and set their dramas in a generalised version of a city, partly to increase the market for the resulting programs. It is not my intention to say that all cultural productions must include local detail. I relate very strongly to the discomfort associated with discussion of identity and the possibility of ‘othering’, or eroticisation, inherent in representation, and will discuss this further in what follows. But in the context of the aforementioned differences, between types of cities globally, there is a gap in our understanding if we imagine that these generalised images are not themselves identified, at the very least, as part of the first world. That they can be considered generalised or anonymous is perhaps a gap in our own thinking. If they contained more local detail, creating further gaps in the knowledge of non-local audiences, the fear is that this would make the work more difficult to understand, appreciate or market. While Grimshaw’s *The Night Book* and Tsiolkas’ *The Slap* have found significant international readership, both novels depict a lifestyle and concerns common to people in other parts of the first world; debates about philosophies of childrearing or political fundraising, for example. But both authors have had previous work read and reviewed overseas (Lea 2009, para 1); and the themes of their most widely read books do not render the places they represent anonymous. Indeed, public library programming in Melbourne has featured *The Slap* as part of a series of hugely popular events themed around local history

and ‘Melbourne Stories’ (Bateman 2012, 9), so it would seem local as well as international audiences can identify with the book and indeed class the book as ‘local’ (Bateman 2012, 7).

As a writer attempting to represent a Brisbane that is multicultural, multilingual and suffused with the mythic, I am particularly interested in the work of Tsiolkas and Grimshaw and what their work reveals about the experience of urban life, particularly contemporary urban life in first world, post-colonial cities in New Zealand and Australia. These authors write about Melbourne and Auckland in a way that is non-anonymous—includes local detail and comments on local experiences in each place—and yet a picture emerges of links between the two cities, in particular through the ways in which the concept of the urban is complicated.

First though, consider the alternative: What makes an anonymous portrait of the urban attractive for writers? Which traditions are Grimshaw and Tsiolkas writing against? The tendency towards anonymity is complex and longstanding. The ongoing influence of Romanticism, well beyond academic circles (Hateley 2005, 1023), has re-enforced a sense of the city as an anonymous and anonymising place; where the changes brought around by the industrial revolution, particularly mass production—the standardisation of material culture and work routines—in a sense, standardised life experience.

More recently, as mentioned above, Australian authors have sought less locally specific representations of Australia (Krauth and Sheehan Bright 1995). In particular, ‘grunge’ representations of Australian cities, such as Andrew McGahan’s *Praise* (1992) and Christos Tsiolkas’ *Loaded* (1995), depict an anonymising and disconnected place. Further discussion of *Loaded* will occur later in this essay, but for now it is important to note that while the depiction of Melbourne focuses on elements common to urban experiences in many places, such as concrete streetscapes and drug culture, it is important to note that the word Melbourne and other local references are mentioned. This is not anonymity in the sense of being unnamed or nameless.

A separate stream of writing, particularly in speculative fiction and film, presents places that are invented; the fictional city of The Tert, for example, features in *Nylon Angel*, (2004) a novel set in dystopian Australia by Marianne de Pierres. Other Australian fantasy authors, such as Sara Douglass, uses settings based on medieval European settings for ‘Epic fantasy’; these places are disconnected from Australian settings and are, in fact, invented places. Wilkins says these places are deeply satisfying to readers precisely because they do not re-enforce particular representations of Australianess or, to quote one year twelve reader, ‘It’s not *My Brother Jack*’

(2008, 274). To move briefly away from the Australian context, Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* (2007), although specifically depicting India and America and the impacts of a global organ trade in an imagined future, invites local theatre directors to update the settings to suit local conditions, so long as a similar power dynamic is maintained. Thus we already have three distinct types of anonymity:

- The anonymity of invention: Particularly popular in speculative fiction, these worlds contain an invented or unnamed city in which anonymising effects of city life can be taken to dystopian or utopian extremes.
- Portrayals that explore the tendency of cities to be sites of anonymity and disconnection for characters, in a specifically named place. In the case of grunge fiction, and in particular *Loaded*, the main character Ari loses himself in moment by moment experiences of drugs, and floats around the city 'not Greek, not Australian, not anything.' Readers' knowledge of the real setting provides a base by which the anonymity can be contrasted or confirmed. While this sense of anonymity in the city is often negative, it can also be used to depict the rise of individual subjectivity, in much the same way as the flâneur changed, and continues to change, concepts of 'life and selfhood' (Autry and Walkowitz 2012, 3), and lessen the scrutiny of family and community.
- An unnamed place that nevertheless includes local detail, cities heavily influenced by a specific place/s but without naming the place/s being referenced. In Glenda Guest's *Siddon Rock* (2009), for example, the place mentioned in the title is partly inspired by the history of South Australia.

Anonymous places are understandably attractive for authors; but I am also interested in how certain types of anonymity are influenced by broader conversations on post-colonial and post-identity thinking. Artists from settler colonial communities, have a long history of a relationship with blank-ness. In Australia, the legal basis for invasion and colonisation, *terra nullius*, the false assertion that the continent was empty at the time of the arrival of the first fleet, implies fictive blankness of astounding proportions. In learning to represent the lives and places in colonised communities like Australia and New Zealand, artists in various media took some time to appreciate and accurately depict their immediate experience (Hassle 2011, para 3). This gap, in our inability to see or value local experience, was addressed by writing featuring local experience and places from Henry Lawson to the Jindyworobaks, which 'flourished from

the 1930s and until the mid 1950s' (Symons 2002, 33), and sought to depict 'a uniquely Australian identity through the evocation of the Australian landscape and environment and through the use of Aboriginal elements' (33). As well as being addressed by those who promoted the study of Australian and New Zealand literature as an academic discipline (Hassle 2011, para 3).

These attempts, to assert the importance of the local, were, of course, later complicated by post-identity thinking. Portrayals that had looked innovative were suddenly seen to create and re-enforce stereotypes of their own. The reflections of Krauth and Sheehan Bright (1995) and Wilkins (2008) mentioned earlier, are supported by the work of Wenche Ommundsen (2011) whose discussion of Asian-Australian authors notes the twin tendency to either de-emphasize the specificity of Asian-Australian experience—that is, to emphasise the ways in which it is similar to the experiences of other Australians—or to value specific historical details over generalized representations. Ommundsen states that Alice Pung's narrative strategy seems to be a way of discussing a community's shared experiences, while avoiding being completely defined by them. He cites Pung's *Unpolished Gem*, which starts: 'This story does not begin on a boat,' and goes on to describe a 'seemingly carefree' (2011, 505) life in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray, which is full of hidden complexities. In fact, Pung's grandmother *did* arrive on a boat, but leaving this story until later in the book 'allows Pung to tell two personal narratives at the same time: asserting her difference from the accounts of trauma which have dominated the popular genre of Asian women's writing and at the same time telling her own version of that story' (Ommundsen 2011, 505). While the focus of her paper is Asian-Australian writing, Ommundsen suggests that a 'profoundly ambivalent attitude towards personal and national past, and to the politics of representation' (Ommundsen 2011, 507) is a characteristic Asian-Australian writers share with 'numerous other Australian writers' (2011, 507).

What do specific portraits, of Melbourne or Auckland, allow the previously mentioned authors to achieve? The first advantage is an ability to consider the histories of representation and post-colonial relationships between these places in very sophisticated ways. The word 'provincial', which appears a number of times in Grimshaw's *The Night Book* (2010), seems both to acknowledge colonial concerns about the value of New Zealand experience and to acknowledge the sense of London, as a cultural and intellectual centre; a place where there was 'no question of not going' (10). It is interesting to note, however, that the word 'provincial' is used mostly in relation to the self-aggrandising world of political fundraising. This world is

depicted in opposition, not to Wellington, or even to London as it is presented in the book, but, rather, to an archetypal London, which appears as a shadow throughout the book.

London, as the Lampton family experiences it, however, is not the site of career success and the high status of the former centre of empire. Instead, we see London primarily from the point of view of the children who attend a tough inner city school at which only Elke, a foster child, has the survival skills to fit in. It is a place where only leaving your socks at home and buying a cheap strawberry necklace can keep you safe from ridicule (17). The book does not discuss the characters' expectations of London in detail. In fact, the above mentioned comment that there might be 'no question' of not moving appears to be the only mention of their expectations. Drawing on readers existing knowledge of London and its relationship with former colonies like New Zealand, allows Grimshaw to make these points with subtle shorthand because they do not require the same world-building to be establish that would be necessary with invented or anonymous cities.

The pejorative nature of the word 'provincial' serves the story, both as a comment on the world of politics and as part of a process of distinguishing the political leader's wife, Roza Hallwright (48), who appears sophisticated and slightly aloof in rooms of social and political climbers. If we remove the pejorative layer of the word 'provincial', however, and see it merely as a neutral descriptor of less prominent place, another interesting point emerges. Brisbane, along with many less prominent places that have in common a constant making and remaking of identity, has a quality which Matthew Condon describes as 'nowadays a thrusting, shiny, city-on-the-make' (Birmingham, para 1). The remaking of identity is a key theme for Grimshaw's characters, particularly in the lives of David and Roza Hallwright, whose complex pasts must be kept at bay throughout the book to facilitate David's political career. These personal stories are echoed by the political changes depicted in the book, a fictional reflection on recent National Party politics in New Zealand which, for better or worse, suggests a nation attempting to remake its sense of self more generally.

Across Grimshaw's books, the sense of Auckland as an urban landscape emerges, one in which storms and atmospheric weather and the built environment are closely connected and contribute to a sense of place. '[S]uburbs washed with rain' (Grimshaw 2007, 1348) and houses, whether with peeling paintwork or large in-ground pools, create a picture of the diversity of people and personal and/or visceral experiences that make up Auckland life. The frequent appearance of the Pohutakawa trees, often at a moment of contemplation (Grimshaw 2010, 67) for the characters, continues the sense of nature as restorative even when quite far from the wilderness,

which interested the Romantics. Grimshaw's writing of Auckland is a deliberately realist one which celebrates the specific details of suburbs and cultural communities and also evokes those moments of life which hint at the absurd, the unexpected, and the mysterious behind the everyday.

In *Opportunity* (2007), the image of a house being moved in the middle of the night is, for me, an outstanding example. The sense of unreality is re-enforced by the fact that the whole scene comes as a surprise for the protagonist. The reader enters into her point-of-view and into her uncertainty about whether the workman at her door is telling the truth or just finding an excuse to get her to step out into the dark night. By this point in the story, we know the workman is telling the truth and the whole operation is, for him, quite routine. But the sense of mystery remains and is only re-enforced, not by the presence of nature in an untouched state, but by the unlikely juxtaposition between the nature and the man-made elements of the story. Grimshaw writes:

They left. I stood on the doorstep. I waited. The dripping garden, the stormy sky. Something scurrying in the bushes. Orange lights flashed in the branches of the trees. Thunder over Mt. Hobson. And then it came over the crest of the hill, a small bungalow under tow, a large, slow, stout vessel, lit by blinking lights, struts creaking, planks groaning; crewed by torchlit men, it sailed by in the drifting dark, cruised grandly on the cruised grandly up the rain slicked street, slid over the swell of Upland Road and was gone into the liquid dark.

(2007, Location 1745 Kindle)

Even in scenes quite removed from nature, the influence of the natural elements remains. Tension, curiosity and love, which connect Simon and his foster daughter, Elke, in the quiet hours when he writes 'The Night Book', evoke connection between the inner-life of the characters; the sense of the natural features of night, such as the temperature, the prominence of memory; and the presence of objects from the human world, like the mug of hot chocolate or a desk (Grimshaw 2010, 20). This atmosphere, created by a combination of natural and human factors, is clearly something important for Grimshaw in the writing process, and is particularly linked to memories of landscape. Speaking of her time in London she has said: 'I was able to sit at night, and write about the physical landscape of New Zealand because it was

very real to me'; 'I was somewhat nostalgic about it; I was in the middle of a long London winter. The distance made it vivid' (Lea 2009, para 5). *The Night Book* rejects the opposition between nature and the city proposed by the Romantics. London and Auckland have distinct identities; however they share a sense of urban landscape; the 'trees and squirrels' (2010, 11) of London, feature alongside footpaths and homeless people.

It is this sense, of an almost numinous urban experience, I hope to capture in my own work. I have included more mythic or magical-realist elements in my manuscript than are present in Grimshaw's work; including the emergence of an entirely new language. This, however, is partly grounded in the same desire to depict mysterious undercurrents of urban experience. In addition, I wish the new language to stand in for innumerable real historical disruptions. I feel the use of a real world setting adds to the believability and power of the non-realist elements. It was these factors, rather than the ability to re-write perceptions of my hometown, that confirmed Brisbane as my setting. If my setting were an invented or anonymous one, it would not have sufficient power to assist the reader to suspend their disbelief.

I wrote the following excerpt before reading Grimshaw's work, but I feel a sense of recognition in her descriptions of landscape perhaps influenced by an urban environment in a similar part of the world:

It's not difficult to understand. It is not foreign. You've done it yourself.

Remember that week when you hardly stopped for lunch? That week when you ate cold lasagne because everyone else was hogging the microwave? The week you saw a dog die on the footpath on the way home from work. The week everyone except you seemed to be having a crisis. And the week when, just after you saw the dog, there was the most beautiful flight of bats. You stopped and stared. They had a strange and wonderful heaviness. It was a flight of joy.

And on Friday, when you got home someone said, 'How was your day?' or even 'How was your week?' And you stopped for a moment and thought.

And then you said, 'It was...' but instead of finishing the sentence you just made a noise. It wasn't 'ah' or 'um' or 'eh' but something in between. It meant nothing and everything. But in that moment you both understood (Author's own work, 2013).

Referring to her collections of interlinked short stories, Grimshaw says she wanted ‘to have so many voices, male and female... that they were completely distanced from myself’ (Lea 2009, para 4). These representations undoubtedly draw on her own experience and perspectives; but there is no doubt she sets out to represent a wide variety of people. Her pages feature Maori, Anglo Celtic and Asian characters, from a number of different socio-economic backgrounds. As someone who has spent only two weeks in New Zealand, on a previous visit, it is difficult for me to fully access the accuracy of these representations, but from the perspective of an outsider they do have resonance. I was fascinated by the consistent attempts by characters to separate themselves from the other, whether it is the refrain ‘No Maoris’ uttered by the owner of a brothel (Grimshaw 2007, Kindle location 956); or the character, Simon Langshaw’s, failed attempt at inclusive language when he refers to patrons in a public bar as ‘people like that’ (2010, 180). This sense of cities, as a place in which we separate different people, fits with archetypal perspectives on the city that suggest a focus on individuality and isolation, even in a crowd. And yet the work of Grimshaw and Tsiolkas suggests that this isolation is illusionary – boundaries between people are drawn unsuccessfully. Attempts at re-making identity are also fragile and boundaries drawn between a current and past sense of self are easily broken. It is this sense, of drawing and breaking boundaries, that is a key element of the urban experiences represented by Tsiolkas and Grimshaw. Characters, David and Roza Hallwright, in *The Night Book*, both have early lives featuring poverty and substance abuse, which they struggle to keep at bay. However, their attempts to maintain barriers between different types of people are a failure. David’s affair and Roza’s re-connection with a friend, put them back in contact with areas of disadvantage and, in Roza’s case, re-ignite patterns of substance abuse. In *Opportunity*, a debate between the adults leads to a family, characterised by ‘middle class conscientiousness’ (2007, Kindle location 4223), being reported for neglect.

Christos Tsiolkas, also writes about the tension between the fundamental connectedness and disconnectedness of city life. In an interview about his first novel, *Loaded* (1995), Tsiolkas describes himself as ‘angry’ at the time of writing (Vasilakakos, 57). The book charts the personal geography of Ari, who describes in the book a personal geography of Melbourne divided into North, South, East and West. His describes which parts of the city are the ‘whitest’ (Tsiolkas 1995, 41), and which are ‘not Melbourne, not Australia’ but a transported ‘Mediterranean village’ (82). Ben Authers (ref) writes eloquently about the ways in which this book speaks back to official narratives of multiculturalism, denying solidarity across or within

communities, particularly in the face of what is perceived as transgressive sexual or social behaviour. Ari escapes into a highly individual world of dancing and drugs, but at the same time longs to 'open his arms to life' (Tsiolkas 1995, 19). This sense of the city, as highly isolating, appears to fit with the binary opposition discussed at the beginning of the paper; but it is not such a simple confirmation. Tsiolkas reminds us, that a city can contain within it the ethos of a village, appears in *Loaded* and continues in *The Slap* (2008). *The Slap's* gentler third-person narrator takes us into living rooms where members of the Greek community, previously derided as 'rich wogs' who ignore community, by the narrator of *Loaded*, are, nevertheless, subject to extensive gossip and community scrutiny. However, this is not a simple equation of non-white ethnicities, with greater community scrutiny, in cities. Aisha, who is of Indian heritage, experiences much less scrutiny from her family (91).

Tsiolkas differs from Grimshaw in that he does not emphasise a sense of urban landscape. Natural elements appear incidental, and the only mention of animals occurs in the context of Aisha's work as a vet. Interestingly, though, the animalistic sexual nature of human beings (Hector in particular) is on full show, as well as, the tendency to draw class and other distinctions by considering others a 'different species' (Tsiolkas 2008, 135). Like Grimshaw, Tsiolkas shows that drawing such distinctions is difficult if not impossible. Shortly after Aisha labels racism as something that exists 'out there' (40), beyond the reach of the inner city tramline, we hear her own in-laws, in Greek, praise her brother for his lighter skin (45).

The narration of *The Slap* constantly changes our perspective on the characters: is Gary, father of the slapped boy, a good person or not? Is Hector a rapist? How much will they succeed in drawing lines that protect their sense of right and wrong? The conclusion of the plot, with the case of the slap dismissed from court and the story of Hector's possible rape further confused, does not amount to much and leaves readers as uncertain about drawing boundaries as the characters. Perhaps the only people who succeed in drawing the lines they are aiming for are Bilal and Shamira, an Aboriginal man and his Anglo Celtic wife who have rejected earlier lives, featuring disorder and alcohol, and converted to Islam. Only a new name and a willingness to cut Gary completely out of their lives will maintain the lines they have drawn for themselves.

Grimshaw and Tsiolkas have captured a sense of urban experience, in Australia and New Zealand, which has engaged readers internationally. It speaks back to the trope of the anonymous city, emphasises the ongoing influence of landscape, and finds complex community ties, not typical of archetypal representations of the city. They both depict a

multiculturalism more uncomfortable than the cosmopolitan ideal. All this fits with my lived experience and will influence my own writing. Perhaps most interesting, however, is the attempt, and eventual failure, to draw firm boundaries around a certain kind of life, and exclude people, or even elements of the self, that are perceived as less desirable. The characters feel it should be possible to maintain discrete sense of self, symbolised by the figure of the flâneur, or perhaps a ‘middle class conscientiousness’; however, the fiction represents a considerable amount of interconnection and complexity of identity, as a key part of urban experience. Thus, they have made a contribution to our understanding of the contemporary urban experience in fiction that goes well beyond notions of the colonial or dystopian or Romantic templates. The work of Tsiolkas and Grimshaw makes a strong case for writers to move beyond the gaps that anonymity leaves in our work and continue to refine local representation—to reflect experience—whether in realist or non-realist modes.

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