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Spawn of *Wuthering Heights*: the dreamy pleasures in adaptive reading and writing

Abstract:

Alison Croggon's young adult novel *Black spring* (2012) activates the feminist considerations present in the triangular love relationship explored in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, with echoes of the emplacement present in Brontë's novel. *Dead country*, a work I may be finished with for want of a market, also adapts Brontë's nineteenth-century text, paying attention to relations with place, and also offering a number of ghostly encounters. While different in their approach, these novelistic revisions, like the poetic revisions of Anne Carson and Kathy Acker, play the game of resistance and submission found in feminist textual reinvention. Such revisions can gesture towards the dream writing described by Hélène Cixous, where unexpected pasts might emerge to create new material ways of being, through text. Croggon's revision, like my own, also echoes Brontë's use of idiomatic voice to invite readers to make their way in and out of the materially textual haunted house of dreams. Readers will enter as they are materially equipped, revealing not only the compromise of perspective but also the potentiality of response that is offered by writing in voice. Readers may or may not find a way in, dependent, as they must be, on the ghosts that speak in their own heads.

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Reading *Black spring*

It is to be expected that an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* will highlight the triangular love relationship that drives the plot of Emily Brontë's nineteenth-century classic novel. Yet there are all sorts of ways to tell this story, meaning some revisions have more feminist productivity than others. Alison Croggon's recent novel *Black spring* (Croggon 2012) is primarily concerned with the 'woman-hatred and injustice' that menaced the romantic attachments that entrap her central character Lina, her Cathy (Croggon 2012). Lina, like Cathy, rails against being treated as a possession by the men who desire her. Their objectivisation, she says, has 'crippled me, and forced me into a vice, so I am all bent over like a blasted thornbush' (Croggon 2012: 231). This novel's critique of possessive love gives a feminist strength to Croggon's work. There is also something eco-feminist in her work. As thornbush, Lina moves beyond her own skin to protect herself from the cruelties she suffers from those who desire her, but her growth is thwarted, like the wuthering winds shape the firs in Brontë's novel. Yet Lina, barbed with her witching abilities, creates some space of her own.

Croggon's revision has much of the deft thievery that Northrop Frye commends over the less productive act of simply borrowing (Frye 1957: 98). As Frye points out, derivative texts offer little to the reader beyond returning them to the source text. Croggon refashions rather than reproduces Brontë's novel, ensuring her text is free of the repetitive 'visor effect' derided by Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1994: 7, 10-13). Croggon gives *Black spring* its 'own autonomy and freedom as a story' by developing her storyline in an alternative world, 'with its own metaphors and laws' (Croggon 2012: n.p.). This allows her to draw deeply on the material surroundings that imbue Brontë's text while addressing the horror of female carceration from her own contemporary feminist perspective.

Like the labyrinth that is *Wuthering Heights*, *Black spring* most obviously draws on Gothic conventions, including the resistant power of the eye, the 'I', the soul. Croggon's Cathy, Lina, has a witchy red-violet flash to her eyes that reveals her power to cast spells. These eyes are reminiscent of 'the full, and the black, and the wild eyes' of Edgar Allen Poe's Ligeia, even as they play on the uncanny Earnshaw eyes of Hareton and Catherine that haunt the beleaguered Heathcliff (Poe 2004: 173). Holding the book in my hands for the first time, I hesitated at the layer of reflective plastic over the eyes of a young girl standing for Lina on the front cover and felt momentarily judged by this cover. Wasn't I too old to read young adult fiction? I read it anyway. Reading adaptations of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is what I do, sometimes out of compulsion, sometimes as a form of self-imposed duty. My hesitation has been corrected by Malorie Blackman, a laureate for children's fiction. She writes, 'young adult novels can and do have all the depth, sophistication and complexity of books written for adults' (Blackman 2014: n.p.). I might have baulked at those spell-binding eyes but Croggon's novel proves Blackman right.

A good proportion of my academic work that focuses on revisions of *Wuthering Heights* is interested in textual relationship to place. It makes sense to me, therefore, that Croggon has described how her memories of running through the Cornish moors as a small girl of six re-emerged when she read Brontë's text in her early twenties.

While Croggon carefully avoided any re-reading of *Wuthering Heights* until finishing her novel, she did add fresh hauntings after her first draft, including quotes from some of the book reviews of Brontë's novel. Croggon's first narrator, for example, suggests that his story might be 'too rough and grotesque for civilized tastes' (Croggon 2012: 278). Croggon offers other subtle addresses to the moors that shape Brontë's novel, including an overall sense that the human is but one small creature amongst others, making do, at best with a dash of witchcraft.

Dream topographies

As suggested by Croggon's recollection of her childhood in the Cornish moors, it was Brontë's depiction of place that drove *Black spring* into its existence. However, it was the vendettas in Ismail Kadare's novella, *Broken April* that 'sparked the world alive' for Croggon in a way that allowed her to thieve in the way Frye exhorts; she 'stole the geography [of Northern Albania] and many of the laws, and added magic' (Croggon 2012: n.p.). Croggon's choice to place her narrative in a 'nameless country that is remote from the imperial centres of civilisation' (Croggon 2012: n.p.) reinforces the emplacement that marks Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, joining Croggon's work with other revisions that add to the material dimension in the love Brontë depicts in her novel.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is a love in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* that goes beyond the desires running between Cathy and Heathcliff and the third in the love triangle, Edgar. This love offers a greater-than human embrace, overshadowing mimetic self-centred desire. Following Heather Walton, I call this an extreme love, a moor/more love. The West Yorkshire moors are central to this love, even while this shadowy moor most often appears obliquely. In particular, Cathy's dreamy words shimmer with alluring purple heather, lifting lapwings or storms that soak her hopes of living in peace. This is most evident in Cathy's famous comparison of her love for Edgar to the foliage of the moors and her love for Heathcliff to its granite evokes place on equal terms with humans (Brontë 1965: 82). This balance is maintained in Croggon's adaptation, where Lina describes her husband Tibor (Edgar) as a 'calm lake' and Damek (Heathcliff) as 'the rock beneath my feet' (Croggon 2012: 203). For Brontë's Cathy, the love she expresses as flora and stone is directed as much to the material world as to the metaphor it creates for her love towards the two men who pursue her. This is less evident for Croggon's Lina, but readers familiar with *Wuthering Heights* will find themselves projecting Cathy's love for the place of her dreams onto their reading of *Black spring*.

I have responded elsewhere to two other revisions of *Wuthering Heights* that playfully engage with the emplacement in Brontë's novel but it is worth mentioning here Anne Carson's remarkable poem 'The glass essay', for the way it re-configures Brontë's moors as muddy stretches in Canadian open spaces, with dreams that enfold with and expand on Brontë's dream-like text, as well as the urban wilds of Kathy Acker's 'Obsession' with their strong nightmarish sense of place (Pyke 2015: n.p.). These poems have shaped my reading of *Black spring*. In addition, they have shaped my

novelistic adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, which also responds to the moors of *Wuthering Heights* through its exploration of different possibilities in love.

While *Wuthering Heights* is one of the few novels I have taken pleasure in re-reading, I did not intend to enter the fraught community of adaptation. Croggon, in contrast, remembers 'idly' thinking 'I'd like to write a book like that one day' (Croggon 2012: n.p.). I was engulfed by *Dead country* as one might sink into sleep. It was mid-morning and I was alone at my family home in the Stony Rises, expecting to spend my time working on scholarly matters. Instead, there I was, on a fire ban of day, with the hot north wind bending down the long brown grass I should have managed better, grabbing some recycled paper and a pencil and writing a piece initially titled *Blistering Depths*. It was a joke with myself, at first, or a dare, but the writing created its own life and became a novel. It has not yet found a publisher, although an extract has found its way out into the world (Pyke 2014). Perhaps this essay will stop it haunting me.

Dead country inverts the storyline and characters of *Wuthering Heights* into the harshly scarred homelands of my childhood, the country of the Djargurd Wurrung people. In this context, I know the Rises only glancingly. Wurundjeri country is also a passing presence in the novel, although I have lived longer in Melbourne than I have in my birthplace. *Dead country* might also have a dash of West Yorkshire in its shape and feel, not only because one of my compulsive edits occurred in that place, but because walking its moors made me read *Wuthering Heights* differently, yet again.

In fact, it might be that all of the revisions of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* I have read, and all of the places that I have been, are traceable in the work of *Dead country.* Brontë's winds howling like the semi-deranged Heathcliff are certainly there, nuanced by the slip of Carson's mud that helps her protagonist escape the dulling mimetic love described so well by René Girard (Girard 1965: 108). Perhaps the horror of Acker's cityscape, those streets that pick her speaker up by the scruff of her neck and throw her into the cathouse, is also present in the city of my novel. Such intertextual and material processes have been described by literary critic Joseph Hillis Miller as a 'making and a discovering' where text, as well as place, can 'create and reveal' landscapes (Miller 1995: 5). The dirt, water and air that forms part of my past and present body inhabits my work, as much as do the texts I have read. My habitats write themselves through my body, and, with a metamorphic dreamy logic, the habitations of others infuse that same writing body, through my reading.

Eco-philosopher Karen Barad has done much to make sense of this strange and irresistible co-affectivity in emplaced writing, describing it, through quantum physics, as a 'mutual entailment', where the 'discursive and material are not reducible to each other' even as they intra-act in an agential way (Barad 2008:138, 140). The texts that I engage with are as much a part of my human material existence as they are a part of my discourse. Emplaced writing makes this relationship very clear. If, as Barad argues, the matter that is sometimes human, and sometimes not, is always a 'differential becoming', then these '(re)configurings of the world', with their 'shifting boundaries and properties', will 'stabilize and destabilize' both the notion of discourse and that of materiality (Barad 2008: 136). As Barad notes, once it is understood that

the human self is more a ‘phenomena’ than a bound entity with ‘inherent properties’, new ways of being are made possible (Barad 2008:136). Barad’s physical understandings of the world gives Luce Irigaray’s notion of ‘divine becoming’ a creative materiality. My textual dreams go with and beyond my body.

The dream house with many rooms

Ludic exchanges between place, the textual producer, the text produced and the writing of those who have consumed the text give vibrant life to textual revisions. It is this serious playfulness in many of the revisions of *Wuthering Heights* that keeps me reading them. Croggon, like Carson and Acker, offers new affective modes for readers that encounter her work through the materiality that I have outlined through Barad and Hillis Miller. This kind of productivity, where the reader moves with and beyond the writer, through place, can be as powerful and as peculiar as a dream.

Literary philosopher Hélène Cixous has explained, in her beautifully written *Stigmata*, that dreams have an ‘aptitude for non-discrimination’ because they offer neither ‘pride, nor shame’ (Cixous 1998: 203). As Cixous goes on to explain, for writing to be ‘strong and generous’ enough to impact upon the reader, it must enter ‘the house of dreams’ (Cixous 1998: 203). In this interiority, which I call dream writing, or dream telling, writers not only draw on their own pasts, but also, they draw on the places that they have felt, both through their reading and through their physical selves. This dream writing does not come easy. Croggon struggled while writing *Black spring*, finding its extreme emotions difficult to write, even as she knew ‘you have to go there, you have to pull on things you know inside yourself that maybe you’d rather not know’ (Croggon 2012: n.p.). A text will reflect this effort through its impact. If a text holds a seeking-out that involves the exploratory writing Cixous describes, then it may have something of Irigaray’s divine becoming, tearing the reader open in order that they might expand (Irigaray 1996: 474). As Irigaray goes on to argue, this divine becoming is never fixed and is largely uncharted. The texts that work with *Wuthering Heights* gesture towards this emergence when they open to dark dreaming places in their writing.

It is possible to at least partially escape entrenched patterns of dominance when the dreamy writing self is released, particularly when this writing reaches towards the mutuality of Barad’s two-way intra-actions. In terms of Barad’s reflexive and reciprocal dynamism, productive adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* offer both a fissure and a conjoining that might help open paths to new modes of becoming, changing what it might mean to love. This effort to escape mimetic love is present in Carson’s revision of Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, even while Carson’s speaker has a humanist perspective that does not deliberately evoke Barad’s sense of a self that is part of a greater non-human dynamic. Acker’s speaker makes an explicit, if not successful, effort to break free of the containing self, loosening these bindings in nightmarish torrents. *Black spring* provides hints of such possibilities, making way for the reader to struggle, with Lina, to find less confined ways of being. The enlivened nonhumans in *Dead country* follow my dreams to reposition the human as no better or

worse than any other species as they struggle through their own constrictions. It is through such varying and multiple efforts that Irigaray's divine becoming might be made possible.

Dream writing is vitally nourishing for certain writers, and it is only this writing that will satisfy certain readers. For Cixous, one exemplar of such writing is Clarice Lispector. Lispector's last book, *The hour of the star*, is a thin little book that trembles with the strength of its writing. This is not, says the narrator, 'simply a narrative, but above all primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes' (Lispector 1986: 13). The protagonist, Macabéa, holds nothing and everything of Lispector. She is a frail bare soul, as strange as a new country even while she is also of the place where Lispector has her own origins. Lispector describes Macabéa as 'nourished by her own entity'; she lives 'feeding off her own entrails' (Lispector 1986: 13). Lispector asks readers to wonder if it is possible to live bared of all one's layer's, barely-fleshed, barely there at all. As the narrator puts it, Macabéa's dreams 'were empty of account of all that inner life,' she 'lacked the essential nucleus of any prior experience of – of ecstasy' (Lispector 1986: 37). In the place of ordinary dreams, writes Lispector, Macabéa 'possessed, without knowing it, the emptiness that replenishes the souls of saints' (Lispector 1986: 37). Depicting Macabéa as much as of place as of person, asks a lot of the writer and also, asks a great deal of the reader. Like dreams slipping away in the bright of day, Macabéa is never quite there, even as she demonstrates, humanly, the possibility of a more-than-human mode of existence. Lispector's dream writing wonders at the act of writing, wonders at Macabéa, wonders at what it is to love in more-than-human ways. Wondering dream readers will go along, with an empathetic awe.

The hour of the star is not a well-known text, but it is well respected. This is often the fate of dream writing; to be a literary rather than a commercial success. As adaptation theorist Rachel Carroll suggests in her account of woman's experimental or conceptual writing, work that fails to be nourished by the 'literary culture' of publishing can, at the same time, flourish in the 'art world' (Carroll 2015: 19). It might be that work that does not hold back from the raw depths of emplaced dreams does not meet commercial success because only a small number of readers are attracted to such works. Taking off the visor can be frightening. Readers who expose themselves to a dream state beyond their own bodies do so at their own risk. This does not, in any way, suggest one should not dream of such writing. Indeed, hiding from such dreams seems a waste of a wide open door.

Ghostly voices

Macabéa is bare bones, but dream writing can also be humanly fleshy, layered with all the levels of consciousness that a reader can handle. Idiomatic voice is a powerful device for such dream writing. Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* is the story of an unnamed narrator who both repels and draws in the reader from the first cryptic heart of words in the novel. 'For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me?' (McBride 2013: 12).

The narrator's irresistible and almost invasive inner consciousness that spins this story is not easy to read. This might be why it took nine years for this extraordinary novel to find a publisher. It has found an easier path to readers, although, following Carroll's analysis, it is known more for its literary merit than its sales volume.

As McBride's startling dream-like novel shows, idiom can connect readers and writers with a distant but vitally intimate resonance. *Wuthering Heights* also works with idiomatic voice, firstly through the lacklustre Lockwood who begins and ends the story with his inept fallible judgement. Croggon 'wickedly enjoyed writing' her Lockwood as the 'self important' Hammel (Croggon 2012: n.p.). I also took pleasure in creating my Lockwood, who turned out to be everything that this first narrator was not. Lily (Bai Hua) tells her story in the rhythms of her inner-city schoolyard Australian, lilted with the nuances of her mother and grandmother's Cantonese, and laced with the kitchen Australian-Greek she has picked up from her boyfriend and his mother. Her voice has been very clear in my inner ear from the first movements in this journey of a novel. Nelly is the second narrator of Brontë's novel. She is unreliable, frustrating and lovable. Croggon has stated that *Black spring* snapped into place once she 'could hear the voice' of her second narrator Anna, who is enclosed by Hammel's story just as Lockwood encloses Nelly. Alan, the second narrator that tells the inner story in *Dead country*, speaks with a rural dialect that is close to the voices I knew in my childhood. Held in the parenthesis of Lily's voice, a voice I grew close to in my adulthood, Alan, like Nelly, like Lily, like Hammel, like Anna, like my dreams, always has his own say.

Multiple voices can help novelists avoid the conclusive tendencies of a story told by a narrator that has only one lens. Once the narrative is fragmented, the reader can no longer assume all necessary truths have been told. They must make up their own minds, from that which they have in their minds. Voice is therefore a writing strategy that reveals not only the compromise of perspective but also the potentiality of response. When readers engage with a range of narratorial voices, it is not only the compromise of perspective that is revealed. Readers are asked to actively participate, engaging in the narrative through the way they hear the voices of the novel. Readers, like writers, can only hear these voices through ghosts in their own heads. The voices must echo, in some way, like a dream resonates with voices and places that seem to have been experienced before while being, at the same time, unfamiliar.

The use of idiomatic voice to provide insight to the demands and freedoms at the edge of social boundaries is not a new novelistic method, but it is not mainstream. For Hillis Miller, idiomatic voice can elicit the 'sympathetic imagination' (Miller 1995: 35), with its empathetic possibilities that have coursed through Romantic sensibility to Victorian sentiment to postmodern ideas of affect. However, this important aspect of dream writing comes with risks, for, as Hillis Miller goes on to caution, there are ethical considerations that run alongside the 'performative use of language', when used as a 'way to get from here to there' for those who 'have eyes to see and ears to hear' (Miller 1995: 187). By writing in idiomatic voice, readers are embedded in the very ideology the writer and reader both seek to resist, they are 'subjected' to the 'irresistible power' of the 'speech act' itself (Miller 1995: 200). It may be, then, a

dangerous thing to write in voice that is not a part of the body that writes. At the same time, it might be the only way for certain stories to be written, and to be read.

I am aware, from my own practice, that when a novel's voice sounds strange to readers, this may be due to a deficiency in the writer. However, in the more exemplary case of McBride, a self-protective readerly deafness may be caused by the reader's discomfort with the verbal body from where these voices emerge. Not everyone wants to explore the house of dreams that so easily can turn into nightmares. Like writing fiction, reading fiction necessitates an out-of-body experience. How writers and readers represent and respond to voices that are not part of their body will be mediated by the ghosts in their heads. They write and read in the shadows of their own selves, and these selves are not always contained in the same skin. It may be, following Barad, that dream writing of voices and places that go beyond the writer's skin quite possibly reach out to the co-affective space allowed for by readers who leave these boundaries as open as the door to a haunted house.

The life and death matter of words

Writing beyond the self, through dream writing, is a generative way for new perspectives to emerge that offer more than the pleasure of a good book. This kind of writing can be a conduit to a place beyond self/ish limited consciousness that is constrained by the visor of the acceptable. Once these boundaries are loosened, other rhetorics beyond the human might also be hosted, as described through Barad's notion of intra-action (Barad 2008: 142-3). Understanding words as physical forms, as well as abstracted notions, understanding them as a material discourse that emerges from emplaced and dreamy writing, strengthens the possibilities of a co-created divine becoming, a new mode of being, as envisioned by Irigaray.

An openness to the materiality of the text, and the co-affectivity of the body may assist moving towards new becomings. Such dreamy possibilities might emerge from another written-about world, in the way Northern Albania is present in *Black spring*'s fantastical Elbasa on the Northern Plateau, with a little help from the Cornwall and Yorkshire moors. It might be the other way around, as it was for me, where weather itself, blistering, not wuthering, was the starting point for *Dead country*. In both of these cases there are aspects of Hillis Miller's topography, where text and place and reader entwine. This is the evidence for Barad's intra-action, where place, writer and reader all contribute to bringing these dream writings to life. While it might not be clear what contribution the nonhuman is making, the material fact is that a contribution has been made.

Dream writing, with place, acknowledges that there is something more than human in the way humans interact with the world. These material possibilities have been demonstrated in *Wuthering Heights,* and in the adaptations by Croggon, Carson and Acker, that I have discussed here. Lispector and McBride also write from the material school of dreams. These active texts, particularly when they employ voice, build on pre-existing material traces within readers, be these etchings from prior readings of Brontë's source text and/or their prior experiences with the places to which they are

attached. To move towards the promising materiality of Irigaray's vision through such dream writing involves going beyond the accepted and the safe. When writers and readers voice their co-affective selves, they display their dreaming, without visors, all those unsuitable features that do not fit within the limits of the world as it is. Croggon uses fantasy to make this revelatory state easier. Lina's spells, like Cathy's ghost, offer dream possibilities in ways that are, because of their fantastical nature, perhaps more approachable for readers. In *Dead country*, I use voice, or more likely, voice uses me. There is a measure of enchantment in writing that opens to dreams that are both of themselves, and of all that is around and within them. Some textual producers and consumers, like writers and readers, might feel more comfortable assuming human language is exclusionary and privileged. For me, accepting the nonhuman in the human voice is as important as moving beyond mimetic love to a more co-affective mode of being with the world.

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