

SA Writers Centre

Kathryn Hummel

Suite from *The Bangalore Set*: the poetry of ethnographic collaboration

Abstract:

This suite of poems from *The Bangalore Set* engages with the fields of postcolonial ethnography and arts-based inquiry. The result of a creative collaboration between an Australian writer/ethnographer and a range of people she encountered while in residence in Bangalore, India, the compositional process behind the poems indicates how arts-based methods can effect balance between the traditional binary of Researcher and Researched within ethnographic studies. Presented chronologically, the poems track Kathryn Hummel's progression from observer to participant to interpreter of others' lives in and views of the city, demonstrating how creative collaboration might shift ethnography away from its divisive colonial origins towards a practice more suited to contemporary postcolonial contexts.

Biographical note:

As a Social Sciences researcher, Dr Hummel investigates narrative ethnography and arts-based inquiry, with a focus on South Asia; as a writer, Kathryn's work includes Poems from Here and The Bangalore Set. Her award-winning new media/poetry, non-fiction, fiction, photography and scholarly research has been published and presented throughout Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the US and Asia at diverse venues, including: Flinders and Curtin Universities, the Forum for Contemporary Theory, Critical Animals, Hay Festival Dhaka and the Hyderabad Literary Festival. A frequent traveller and writer in various residences, Kathryn's activities can be followed @ kathrynhummel.com.

Key words:

Postcolonial ethnography – poetry – collaboration – arts-based inquiry

Artefact:

The Bangalore Set¹

Lady with Sunflower

In the gallery
the caretaker
smacks down sculptures
with a dusting rag
applying more disdain
than bestowed on
the family TV.

Rat and Squirrel

In sun soaked Lalbagh
multiple deaths
of little creatures
are illuminated
while those still sentient
(as they live and breathe!)
notice me
larger than life.

Drink Me

Long Black:
shampoo in India
coffee at home.

Balaji Janrel Stars²

Hard to tell if the moon is on the wax or wane
A neat compass cut is missing, as if she were
made of paper after all—as the best of us dolls
are—and there are wires crossing the line

of vision too. At first the words in their bold
painted hand have more context with the sky than
with groceries. It takes a minute or so to return
to earth; to realise the post-midnight sky is starless
and that their burning cannot be purchased from a
shut-up shop front among the bald wilds of Bangalore.

*The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Could Imagine*³

There's a cat
yellow with yearning
yowling in the stairwell
of the fifth block
like some brat who's forgotten
to pinpoint its front door.
It woke me up again today,
the dawn ghost of my
tensile nightmares.
Good God.

The milk was sour
after yesterday's rush to leave
for a working brunch:
the maid didn't come
to put it away.
Milk coffee, milk tea
not possible
without stepping down to the cool bar
under the gaze of the *haalkaara*
glowering in his shack

behind the rack of sweet bread rolls,
paunch against the change drawer
always empty of coins.
The guy I was avoiding
I ran into on the path.
Good God.

Too much coffee
while working.
A friend phoned in lunch:
on the road and at the bar
a plate of pork, a pitcher of beer
and chat, chat, chat.
Good God.

A spontaneous trip to the city's
central café for the art crowd
and obligatory iconoclasts:
taken with more coffee, memories
of the guy who's avoiding me.
Walking the street, noon wine rain
on my well-done hair
In someone else's car
Not heading home
Not wanting home
Good God.
The trapped cat

will still be yowling yellow
on the step of midnight
on the turn of another day
just the same.

Reality Sets In⁴

i.

Everybody goes on Sabbatical
and comes back (un)changed.

ii.

Think in terms of fences
They spring up everywhere
except when needed
to keep the goats away.

iii.

Kajal promises longevity
but eye-lines always smear
when applied to defiance.

*Independence Day*⁵

All rooftops—peach and grass
green, pink as rose and cotton
blue—hoist their flags
of historic revolt,
a heraldry of purity
above black water tanks.
The flags flap as the crows fly
overhead, in survey, intent
on picking the innards
of a fresh road rat.
With all the might of the wind
behind, the flags still lack
the power of coconut fronds,
with such fibre in their being,
and will not stretch to break a fall.
They fly only to sustain
the civic distance
between neighbours and dreams
as fresh as laundry,
at the same time
drying and dusting.

*Homecoming*⁶

It is never easy heading home
when your feet could walk serenely on;
when the night is so tempting and again so strange.
Throw off all influences and rejection;
step in deeper to place you only know by name.
Somehow the map is at the soles of your feet,
which know, with the assurance of the brain,
they must settle soon if the mind's to be
clear enough even for fitful sleep.
Eyes take in sights that lead past
the familiar: there is a fresh garland
in her hair; some bright gold trim
and flower boxes made of bricks,
painted grey against the white boundary line.
Someone bids you good evening and smiles.
It is not a dare but a full-hearted
strain of music to your bitter ears.
So here come the sounds now, and presently
you are arrested by the sound of a crack.
On the balcony above your head,
two men puzzle over a ripe coconut,
smashing its hoary side against their house.
They smile as if destruction is the best of jokes.
The milk is good for a laugh at least.
Reluctantly, the fruit yields its tip
for the night to drink its insides dry.
You pass by, thirsty now
for something white and sweet.

*Afternoon Swill*⁷

The desiring I
in India,
Bengaluru to be precise
sat down to tea
at a French café
in friendly company.
Hassan from Iraq asked:
Do you know our culture?
You should get to know
our culture and
put it in a book.
I write, I said, on Bangladesh
having known a little of it
as much as can
an Australian
social scientist.
The smiling waitress then
leaned in, bearing
espresso,
hummus
and a
chicken tikka sandwich.

*Brigade Junction*⁸

Neon bites the night
alongside Yousuf Sait's corner,
the significance of dedication lost
like the storied stripes of the portico

on the shopping crowd.
Inflated paper balloon bags
butt against thighs.
Want to get? Want to buy?

Plated behind glass
a brown model and
a white one keep watch,
their perfected limbs
a measure of what
you might achieve through
paper or plastic: these jeans

or that finger-licking chicken.
Tourists feast traditionally
on jute-garnished handicrafts
carried in hand with brands of

glossy global magnitude.
They round the corner on repeat
blinded by the sights
troubled by the glitch
of missing some experience.

Cotton socks! Cotton socks!
Sounds more like a lament
than a compulsion to buy.

The rain slurps down
the throat of the street
and is muddled by car tyres.
Conversations are public:
advice pools in where

the rupee does not.
Sunglass stems spring
from the fist of a
heavy-eyed salesman
requesting passing
phone numbers

Just like that.

A flock of foreigners
in ironed Ethnic Chic
pick over broken ground:

from the haven of Starbucks
they follow their guide
out into the jungle.

*Arjun in the City*⁹

A big beard can be
the mark
or mask
of a man; a non-statement,
something to grow for warmth
and bronchial protection
in winter season.

Do strangers recall faces
or details more significant,
like trousers?
Nope, just the talk of endless
hours, a nervy proposition.
A polite harmony of will
with little to no chemistry
and everything left as it should be:

a one-off live event
preventing re-runs and recordings.

The attempt to move on is
as persistent as loneliness.
If you can't be all things for
all people at all times,
leave the city,
then return.

Don't have a personal life
or even such a beard.
There seem to be
enough of them bristling
in the confines of this city.

*Stepping Out*¹⁰

Poetry first
like headfirst:
the application
turned and attacked you.

White frock and
another handbag swap.

Remember to pack
your phone, on charge,
and Mary McCarthy:

put in your teeth
at the door.

Elegant dust stirs up
en route to the Metro
and along the stops
to Indiranagar.

Seldom, India—then
everywhere.

There is always chai
in the street,
however your evening
progresses

stumbling over pavers
mussed poshly
by mud and BMWs.

In the space
there are more pictures
and benign interactions
for one pard spirit
to sip.

Waylaid by Germans,
distracted by promise.

The poem reaches up
but is lost

Somewhere in
the massive quiet
dusted dark
of HAL Stage II.

The very trees pitch
an iron curtain
at the sky:
black on blue.

You have no idea
whose hand you reach for
but comfort comes
from all quarters:

the last two are meat.

Anyway, reach.
The poem can wait
until tomorrow.

How_Bazaar?¹¹

Blessed and released
in an absence of wing
and flurry
Every round capped head
converging, every pressed
pale kurta spotless
from supplicating
a sign of mercy
a sign of peace
a sign of roots connecting

the clamour of this gathering
a record played
from a farther lane
bumps over the bazaar
a tubular layer to the din

dimmer
than candles glimmer
chaat oiled with spices or salt
piled or tucked into paper.
Meat and onion fry
honeys the turgid air.
Trouser lengths are
measured by the forearm

as the fray
is appraised by
a meditative dog
looking not looking for
more to see, to eat, to pray—

the door props open.

Lost in cotton,
so many threads
the warp forms a knot.
No curiosity
unravels eyes or beards.

Still covered in the earth
it turned from,
wholly formed
with a low hum, the throng
moves slow like the turning
of a globe, and scatters
soon enough.

Urban Planning¹²

Bangalore is

quite a bland space. Like all young things it requires speckles on the walls, some blending here and there. It's a city of change unsure of what it's changing into. There is unease with no evolution, like it's recovering from a sudden shock. A beggar might have no food or shoes but can quickly acquire a cell phone. The social strata have no rebels: you ask for a counter culture? This *is* the culture. The only continuity is discrimination and a method of branding art. It's all about distrusting some Others and revering *an* Other. Everyone here is struggling to fit in, let alone think

independently.

*Same Same*¹³

The coffee?
I've had better.
People come here
because they're used to it.
The place,
as well as the taste.
They see their friends
or maybe
not even their friends—
just people they're used to seeing.
The smokers smoke outside
in a separate crowd
Arrangements are made
for cup-to-hand delivery.
Every day they stand there
straining the edges of the street
exchanging the same hellos
with the same people passing by.

*With What Gentillesse*¹⁴

More a pocket shop
than a hole in the wall,
lined with cabinets
glass-fronted, trimmed
with oldish paper and newish dirt.
Best quality quiet within,
by virtue of the vendor
who gives no voice to his words.
With what gentillesse
he gestures, smiling;
one front tooth
a decided oyster pearl.
How erudite his overpricing
of cheap Bombay prints
and Thai imports: garish all,
mostly synthetic, swathed
gloriously over outside racks
to brighten the lurid noon.
Requests for high-rise panties
are scribbled on the courteous
leaves of his notepad.
His lips move without flippancy;
his hands articulate a propriety
unabashed. He is, perhaps, the
calmest of cavalier conmen
in the shadiest shop where
slender discounts are pressed
on the bold face of the calculator
and where the job is royally done:
every purse-light lady who emerges
holds herself with the carriage of a queen.

*Poona-Bengaluru*¹⁵

Never be the last to leave the party.
Applying desperation to keep it alive
distracts from what you came here
to do: rediscovery is a happy ending.

The first reason for staying up all night:
bourbon. The second: the etymology
of attraction, of repulsion. The third
and last: a lack of longing to leave
plush beds, crisp corners, temporary
life with teacups laid over carpeted sounds;
with your chosen occupation just beyond
the compressed swing of the door.
Troubling the same conversation is as
comforting as the loop of television
programmes you survey not to watch.

The closed-in warmth ripples outside
as daybreak breathes the air of its
fresh vicinity. If you regret the end,
remember what is done is due to
the full and simple feeling of the present
graining away into the container of the past.

This could be the last long morning.
Try, at least, to light matches so
each flare illuminates your steps
along the return of the road.

Research statement

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts that neither empathy nor brokerage can ‘get round the un-get-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions...are the describer’s descriptions, not those of the described’ (1988:144–5). Yet what if this fact *could* be circumvented—through a creative, collaborative approach? The following suite of poems from *The Bangalore Set* engages with the research fields of postcolonial ethnography and arts-based inquiry (Behar 2003; Gardner 1997; Leavy 2008). The result of various interactions between myself, an Australian writer/ethnographer, and the people I encountered while in residence in Bangalore, India, the compositional process of the poems indicates how arts-based methods can affect balance between the traditional binary of Researcher and Researched within ethnographic studies. Presented chronologically, the poems track my progression from observer to participant to interpreter of others’ lives in and views of the city: reworking the dominance of the (Western) ethnographer’s voice [Minh-ha 1989], they incorporate direct quotes (‘Same Same’), dialogue (‘Afternoon Swill’) and interpret the emotional space, often unarticulated, between those both local and foreign to Bangalore (‘Brigade Junction’).

As research, the poems show how arts-based inquiry can be used as a tool of ethnographic investigation, generating knowledge construction across disciplinary boundaries (Prendergast 2009), and demonstrate how a creative, collaborative approach might shift ethnography from its divisive colonial origins towards a balanced practice more suited to contemporary postcolonial contexts (Hage 1998; Hall 1992; Parry 1997, 2004). *The Bangalore Set* was launched at the Kena Artists’ Initiative in Bangalore on October 18 2015, where participants presented their own creative work in various languages, extending the process of intercultural arts-based collaboration to performance. This research has the potential to influence ethnographic practice in societies defined by hybridity and multiculturalism, addressing the issue of how individuals with different cultural backgrounds, identities and languages can gain mutual understanding through arts-based methods.

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Endnotes

¹ Drafted four days after the author's arrival in Bangalore.

² Based on the street view from comedian Ahmed Shariff's terrace in Lingarajapuram. A shop sign stating 'Balaji Janrel [General] Stores' was misread as the poem's title.

³ Describing the experiences of female college student Parinita Chetty, who lives in a tight-knit housing colony in Baiyyappanahalli.

⁴ In conversation with Vish V. Vasu, a Bangalore businessman on a career break.

⁵ After scene inside housing colony Jal Vayu Towers, Baiyyappanahalli, August 14 2015.

⁶ Written during a lonely walk from Kasturi Nagar to Baiyyappanahalli.

⁷ In conversation with 'Hassan' in a Kalyan Nagar café.

⁸ After watching and talking with street vendors on the corner of MG and Brigade Roads.

⁹ After a late night conversation with musician Arjun Chandran.

¹⁰ Written on the occasion of the opening night of the bangaloREsidency Exhibition, shown at the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, Indiranagar.

¹¹ Written on market day after morning prayers in Shivaji Nagar.

¹² In conversation with Kiran while walking up and down MG Road.

¹³ After a visit to the Indian Coffee House, Church Street, with Sameer Raichur.

¹⁴ After a shopping trip to a ladies' clothing emporium, Kasturi Nagar.

¹⁵ In conversation with screenwriter Vaspar Dandiwalla on the last night of the Pune Literary Festival 2015.