

Solid Air – Australian and New Zealand Spoken Word.

Edited by David Stavanger and Anne-Marie Te Whiu. Brisbane, University Queensland Press, 2019.

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Reviewed by Nicola Hyland.

Like a published play script, a book of spoken word lyrics represents a site of potential: one which requires performance to truly come alive, but also offers up a myriad of imagined embodied possibilities. Compiled by Australian-based poets/producers, David Stavanger (AKA Ghostboy) and Anne-Marie Te Whiu (Te Rarawa), *Solid Air* is a textual record of spoken word kōrero from established and emerging multidisciplinary artists across Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. This is, obviously, a somewhat ironic celebration of a vocal lyric form. The collection's cover design, illustrated by Des Skordilis (AKA Skords), represents four interlinked hands, each clutching a pencil attached to a mic: a potent visual signifier of the connectivity between writing and action expressed through spoken word – minus the verbal resonances. Yet the text also speaks to vitality of silence – or the “air” – between utterances. In her foreword, Gomeri poet Alison Whittaker states “poetry is about negotiating power as much as rearranging air. This negotiation is present as it moves from face-to-face and broadcast performance to the more static, secluded page” (xvi). Drawn away from the charged collective atmosphere of a slam poetry session, the collection offers a more intimate union with spoken word; a solitary, delayed, yet still invigorating, encounter.

As might be expected, the introduction to this anthology is a poetic manifesto in and of itself. A spoken word piece is defined as anthropomorphic, “a lived and a living thing: within the skin of the text, the song of the line, the architecture of sound” (xvii). The narrative traces the whakapapa of spoken word in both regions, with the seeds formed in inaugural national poetry slams: Australia in 2008, New Zealand in 2011. Stavanger and Te Whiu describe how the local scene coalesces influences from US slam culture, glocal hip-hop movements and intergenerational Indigenous oral narrative forms (xvii). The authors lay fervent claims for the legitimacy of the form and the artists represented within the collection. They not only include texts often (previously) unwritten, but also works which speak back to the stereotypical bookish, written poetry scene – although it should be noted that the anthology also integrates a number of poems from well-known “booked” poets, artists and activists including Miles Merrill – founder of slam poetry in Australia – the ‘taniwha of slam’ Te Kahu Rolleston, 2016 Commonwealth Poet Selina Tusitala Marsh, the late, great John Clarke, NZ it-poet Hera Lindsay Bird and Quan Yeomans from Regurgitator. The definition and emancipating connotations of a designated field of ‘spoken word’ allow for what Stavanger and Te Whiu perceive as a “democratisation” of the lyrical form (xviii). There is a recurring thread of inclusivity herein; the authors speak to a movement where practitioners meet to “elevate, celebrate and mobilise,” in “a room where there’s room for everyone” (xviii). Stavanger and Te Whiu laud high profile spoken word artists leading the way, such as Kae Tempest (UK), the heart-wrenching Denez Smith (US) and the zeitgeist poetry of Warshan Shire (UK) amongst a crop of influential “Instagram poets” transcending “both the page and the stage” (xix); young celebrity poets leading the form out of the margins and into the mainstream. Yet the authors caution that there is still much work to do to combat the continued ghettoisation of spoken word artists: “to disrupt the dominant narrative of what ‘page poetry’ is” (xx). The diversity of pieces in the collection are exemplified by the distinctive formatting and layout of various texts; it is a visual cacophony demanding an active reader. Stavanger and Te Whiu seek to capture the traces of the improvised and feelingful experiences of ‘on the floor’ poetry, as individuals within a vibrant community: “*Solid Air* is not only a gateway to the multiplicities

of poetry available in our region – it is a house in which poetry resides, a speculative investment, constructed from open windows and unlocked doors” (xxx).

Divided alphabetically, this compilation of over 100 texts offers an immersive and affective experience. The artists greet each other on page as comrades across both sides of the Tasman, moments I invest in through my own Australasian whakapapa and former (postgrad) life in Melbourne. The pieces show common experiences of our sister nations as far from utopian: intergenerational trauma, anxious diaspora, everyday otherness and systemic racism. They resist an uneven and inaccurate literary canon - sometimes with a gentle voice, sometimes, rightfully, enraged:

Australian redneck racists
Get back on your convict slave ships
Go home
We don't need you no more
(Lorna Munro, 139).

Unusual girls fuck up their dendrology
cos they didn't come to bushcare
fern up the gully girls
go live those pastel bush dreams
while me and my ancestors sit
pissed swinging on the veranda couch

RIGHT WHERE YOU WROTE US!
(Evalen Araluen, 7).

Marked by regionality, several speak to, and as, the idea of the nation:

I am above water, holding
onto a country that drowns
with or without me
(Eunice Andrada, 4).

Yet, more often, the reader encounters places here on a micro level, in visceral scenes of community – from Sara Mansour's portrait of Punchbowl in Sydney with “Homemade tabouli and tomato sauce” (120), to Courtney Barnett's ‘Depreston’:

We drive to a house in Preston, we see police arrestin'
A man with a hand in a bag
How's that for first impressions? This place seems depressing
It's a Californian bungalow in a cul-de-sac (18).

There are portraits of distinct and located bodies. Tessa Rose profiles the various ‘Sean/Shawn/Shorn and Shaun's’ she has known (161), while Jesse Oliver deftly describes trans identity as “a little from column A and a little from B” (150).

As episodes of the everyday, some pieces also embrace mythic mundanity; from Jordan Hamel's lament to a dead toastie machine,

bought with change seeking refuge in the creases Trade Me couches make
We've sacrificed bread to the gods of gastric distress
and the rusted amber handle, with congealed Edam icicles (94)

to Bela Farka's ode to Tom Cruise's dental hygiene:

Tom, I had a dream last night, that. I was your dentist brushing your perfect
ivories (75)

Others find dynamic ways of looking at the worst of human encounters, such as Mohamed Hassan's 'Customs: a love story':

I'm just a boy, standing in front of a boy
Asking him to let me in. (95)

There are reminders of the claims of outrageous suffering by our forebears'-

In my day when it was cold
Father'd hop into bed with you
And set fire to his beard

In my day children were seen but not heard
They'd died!
They were all ghosts!
But you still had to work!
(The Bedroom Philosopher, 20).

- and the absurdist philosophy of contemporary slogans:

Children are the orgasm of the world like hovercraft are the orgasm of the future or
silence is the orgasm of the telephone or shit is the orgasm of the lasagne
(Hera Lindsay Bird, 22).

The reader is invited to be empowered,

These Mana Wāhine
Playwrights of power
Gladiators if you will
Continue to allow me to borrow their bravery
And wear their bigger shoes
With which to leave bigger prints
(Daisy Lavea-Timo, 111).

to be resistant,

Pussy cat, pussy cat
What did you there?
I frightened the western world
With my big hair
(Selina Tusitala Marsh, 123).

and to revel in the fantastic tongue-play of expertly worded lyrics:

Babies grow in babies
leaving paisley prints on ladies' skin
(Courtney Sina Meredith, 131).

It is hard to escape the sense that this anthology feels like an extraction or reduction of the performative power of the artist out loud and in person. But this lack is also a kind of provocation; I did not stop at this book alone – I sought out recordings of several of the artists online to hear them perform these pieces, then re-read them with the author's own voice (and

body) in my mind's ear. This is an aspirational collection which (re)claims freedoms – of forms and ideas. Crafting a discourse of exchange between speakers and listeners, writers and readers, *Solid Air* defends its own notable aural absences; it offers readers the space to listen in their own time, sites, and terms.