

Long Paddock

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*These Words are Loaded Hearts:
the Poetry and Short Stories of Vicki Viidikas*

The aim of this essay is to consider, with close reading and in the context of feminist theory, the question of representation itself as a central presence in the work of Vicki Viidikas, and to examine how and why her work still holds currency today. A discussion of her work allows for its reappraisal, appropriate in the light of its undervaluation at the time of publication, and relevant with the 2010 publication of a fresh book of her work, *New and Rediscovered*, edited by Barry Scott (with a foreword by Kerry Leves) and published by Transit Lounge Publishing of Melbourne.

Viidikas gained wide publication for her short prose and poetry from 1967 to 1984. From then until her death in 1998 she wrote prolifically but published only rarely. Her work is inherently interesting because it foregrounds the relationship between language, subjectivity, sexuality and desire. It possesses a strength and independence that arises from her use of experimental language and form, expressing a feminist aesthetic with its particularities of disruption and fragmentation. The use of contradiction and obfuscation, for example, aligns with the feminist project of finding new ways for representation to work.

In 1985 Elizabeth Lawson wrote in *Hecate* that:

Seeded in the political turbulence of the sixties, the literary revolutions that at last flowered [...] in the Australia of the seventies, had especial importance for the literature of women. In this period, women's dissent writing was suddenly free [...] however briefly or partially, in the sunlight of acceptance and belonging. (103)

Lawson described the new freedom of expression enjoyed by feminist writers whose "poems were primarily concerned with the freedom of refusal, the painful, joyous clearing of the patriarchal brambles that beset that point of departure" (103). Clearing the patriarchal brambles, the short prose and poetry of Viidikas grew out of the social and cultural changes of the 1970s.

Besides numerous poems and short stories in journals and anthologies, Viidikas published a volume of poetry and short prose, *Condition Red*, in 1973, a collection of short prose, *Wrappings*, in 1974, a third volume of poetry, *Knäbel*, in 1978, and her last volume of poetry/prose, *India Ink*, in 1984. Although Viidikas did not publish a novel-length piece of fiction, she left in her papers a novel manuscript titled *Kali and the Dung Beetle*.^[1] Excerpts from this novel appear in *New and Rediscovered*.

Displaying innovation in her oeuvre of work, Viidikas' writing can be interpreted as politically motivated, evoking the excesses, dramas, confusions and delights of the 1970s, and often portraying emotions such as anger, impatience, scorn and longing. In *Condition Red* the author explores the woman poet as subject, rather than as object (in the same way that Jennings did two years later with her poetry anthology, *Mother, I'm Rooted*). In *Wrappings* the narrator interrogates the vulnerability of the female subject and the impossibility of representing her. In *Knäbel*, a manifestation of the bizarre world of drugs is underpinned by a New Age awareness; and in *India Ink* Viidikas pursues her preoccupation with mysticism, the drug culture and female sexuality, extending her work into a transnational context where she examines the Western woman subject travelling alone in, but always

outside of, a patriarchal Hindu world. *Kali and the Dung Beetle* reads as an extended prose version of these themes, relating the adventures and perceptions of a young white female in search of enlightenment.

Viidikas' work has been remembered in two ABC radio broadcasts – *Vicki's Voice* and *Feathers/Songs/Scars* – produced by poet and friend Robyn Ravlich. The second title is taken from a Viidikas poem, "Feathers/Songs/Scars", about the (un)reality of memories which are "arms of feathered dragons":

Memories are rice paper,
transparent/fragile
Memories are dream storage
Memories are distorted doors opening
knives/masks (*Knabel* [hereinafter *K*] 51)

The recordings use Viidikas' own voice and those of her contemporaries. On *Vicki's Voice*, her friend Robert Adamson describes her writing as "organic, holistic, courageous, adventurous, foolhardy, delightful, dangerous, non-conformist".

In a 1975 recording of a conversation with interviewer Hazel de Berg, part of which was later used in *Feathers/ Songs/ Scars*, Viidikas maintained that some of her influences were "French writers, symbolists, surrealists" (*Conversation*). Adamson writes that Rimbaud was influential to the thinking of his contemporaries and himself, as were the lyrics of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Buffy Sainte-Marie, the writing of Jack Kerouac and the American Beat poets, including Allen Ginsberg (*Inside Out* 246-52).

Alison Bartlett, in her 1998 study of Australian women writers, *Jamming the Machinery*, argued that "new meanings" emerged when she used new lenses to examine women's writing about subjectivity, the body, sexuality and desire:

One of the most significant ideas to emerge from both theories of *écriture féminine* and the contemporary writing being produced by women in Australia is the potential of writing to produce new meanings, other desires, and alternative structures through which to imagine our life stories. (181)

The French feminist project collectively termed *écriture féminine* was, according to Bartlett, "a style of writing marked primarily by its disruption to conventional reading, writing and representational practices as produced through, and supported by, patriarchal values" (1).

Viidikas' work paralleled this idea, and also the urging of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, who argue in *The Newly Born Woman* that "woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves" (94-95). Viidikas constantly interrogated meaning with her "unimpeded tongue", as the following anecdote shows. The Sydney poets often met at poetry readings in Balmain or Glebe. After one meeting, Viidikas asked impatiently: "Where have the readings led us?" and answered her own question by decrying the inhibiting nature of poetry readings, "dead, ancient, so/ used their breath is stale" ("Listening Backwards", *K* 56).

Anne Vickery describes Viidikas' work as "daring", noting that in her writing "the female subject assumes perspective and narrative control" (272). Addressing themes of sexuality and desire in a counter-cultural context, Viidikas' work can be seen as a kind of post-modernist literary bridge. It spans the gap between women's realist writing of the previous decades (for example, Dorothy Hewett's 1959 *Bobbin Up*) and the plethora of women's feminist fiction of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Viidikas told de Berg that in 1967 that she was paid three dollars for her first published poem, "At East Balmain", by *Poetry Australia* (*Conversation*). Using an unconventional form of free verse that contains mathematical rhythms, with a varied number of lines for each stanza (stanza 1 has 2 lines, 2 has 3 lines, down to 8 with 5 lines), the piece describes the harbour with its "clear water washing million year old stones" and conveys a sense of timelessness: "[t]his day will be submerged in a

thousand other days”.

The beginning represents human invincibility, from which “[o]ne could get the feeling of walking across the water, / without moving a muscle, just sitting and gliding / into grey”. Then the poem shifts to an emphasis on vulnerability and death. In the last stanza, the narrator describes a rat, “arms stretched” in a “stiff” representation of death:

Dried weed hangs from a bleached stick, like a dead
rat swinging ... I found one yesterday. So cold
and grey and stiff with his tiny mouth open, arms
stretched above his head. I felt very quiet because
his bead eyes had lost their sparkle. (14)

Early in the poem the harbour is represented as benign; the sudden disruption of mood renders the harbour menacing. This unconventional juxtaposition of images is an effect Viidikas often employs in her work, which displays stylistic devices such as fracture, disruption and unexpected associations of words to obscure or challenge representation.

This early poem also presages her continuing fascination with notions of death. The second poem, “They Always Come” (*Condition Red*), eerily foreshadows her own death. The speaker, imagining that when “they” come “[t]hey’ll find / a mirror smothered in lips”, asks:

Which drug did she take?
Which pain did she prefer?
What does the lady offer
behind the words?
Their criteria will be:
so long as she’s dead we may
sabotage and rape (2)

The poem expresses the poet’s fear that her work might not be taken seriously. The burst of questions, followed by an imagining of an inappropriate use/interpretation of her body (and of her writing) after her death, formulates an angry protest.

The image of the “mirror smothered in lips” foregrounds another trope Viidikas often used, echoing Sylvia Plath’s use of the mirror motif in her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar* to represent her protagonist Esther’s inability to understand herself. Mirrors, for Viidikas, serve many purposes. They illuminate the speaker’s sense of self, as in her poem “Logic”: “Your self is a reflection of everything experienced. / Your experience is a mirror of being here before” (*K* 50). They provide opportunities for the writer to represent the limits of conventional, “inhibited” sexuality, as in “Well Scrambled”: “I want to be released from mirrors and inhibited bedrooms” (*K* 9). They mirror the moon sailing “through the lake of emptiness” (“O Woman of the Moon”, *Condition Red* [hereinafter *CR*] 35) or represent “someone other than myself;/ a mirror shirt worn naked” (“there is a striving for”, *CR* 57) and reveal the Other in “the mirror of your eyes” (“Reflections”, *CR* 59).

Time, dreams, memories, the work of language, and corporeal imagery all constitute recurring themes throughout Viidikas’ work. Other topoi that fascinated her were knives and hearts, both also employed by Plath in *The Bell Jar*, where they symbolise death and life. In their striving for affect, other contemporary writers also used them. Jennings echoed these thematics in her 1975 collection, *Come to Me My Melancholy Baby*, writing about the break-up of a relationship in “Keeping a Close Watch on This Heart of Mine”:

Sunk,
and how could I ever explain
the bathtubs, the slashed wrists, the overdoses,
except I ought to know better,
unrequited love, passion,
all that junk, and me
an enlightened and dedicated feminist?

Except you know why, and you won.
One more victory, to a man,
and I am sad, mad, angry, drunk, and melancholy.
I won, after all,
walking the line. (58)

This title is reminiscent of that of Viidikas' poem, "Keeping Watch on the Heart". Its last line reads "Keeping watch on the heart, lest it fail and remain imprisoned" (CR 19). Both Viidikas' and Jennings' poems make reference to Johnny Cash's 1956 hit song about fidelity, "I Walk the Line".

The imagery of hearts occurs often in *Condition Red*, which has a red cover, presaging its preoccupation with corporeality. The poem titled "red is the colour" begins: "red is the colour / when creation burst and the first physical thing / stepped amazed into itself". Later in the poem a sense of connection yet also disconnection is conveyed concurrently: red is "the heat from their bodies as they passed through each other" (CR 14-15).

This contradiction of meaning – or the creation of new meaning – is one of the hallmarks of Viidikas' work: a continual quest for meaning pervades her writing. The prose-poem "The Obsession. The Voyage", exploring the female poet as subject, begins: "today as always I am obsessed with myself. In here, groping around for meanings ..." (CR 37). It echoes the aim of *écriture féminine* – to question, disturb and disrupt patriarchal meaning by writing in new ways.

In the broadcast *Feathers/Songs/Scars* Adamson likens the effect of Viidikas' work to "blood pulsing through her life and passions". It is no coincidence that several of the poems in *Condition Red* bear the word "heart" in the title: "9 of Hearts", "Keeping Watch on the Heart" and "Loaded Hearts".

This last poem, "Loaded Hearts", employs discontinuity and dense metaphor with little transparency between the language and meaning. It elaborates on issues central to counter-cultural lifestyles: music, drug-induced experience and the Vietnam War, where "tigers are eating through walls and Hendrix is playing from hell". Fragmentation and almost impenetrable imagery are evident in the last five lines: "Our fingers are snarling in chaos / Oh take it easy baby the lords have too many kingdoms / They're playing darts with hypodermics / The fools are recording pain / We're making weapons from our dreams" (CR 4).

In this image, fingers, which should work to encompass endeavour or pleasure, are entangled in erratic, unproductive action. The poem moves through a series of contradictions in which hypodermics, usually instruments for delivering release, are seen as implements of attack. Dreams are transformed into a call for social and political revolution: line six reads, "[t]hese words are loaded hearts". Even this title phrase, "loaded hearts", works as a contradictory metaphor: usually "loaded" would be associated with guns and death, while the conventional meaning of "hearts" is one pertaining to romantic love. Significant in Viidikas' use of "hearts" is the way she undermines established notions. The urgency with which the poet "loads" her words deconstructs the usual image of benign hearts.

I would agree with Livio Dobrez, who suggests in his biography of Michael Dransfield that "the Viidikas subject exists in wild and extravagant – and costly – gestures of clutching desire" (120). *Condition Red* unapologetically interrogates the female self and her subjectivity, her sexuality, the myth of romantic love and the safety of a suburban lifestyle versus the joy and pain of overt desire, as in: "[f]or days they / lay in bed, pretty woman, pretty man. They gave up sighs and / wives to the rising darkness" ("Hypnotist lover, the dream of fire" 39).

The reception of *Condition Red* was mostly positive. "Four poems on a theme", John Tranter wrote in his 1975 review of *The First Paperback Poets Anthology*, "takes on a notoriously difficult form [prose poetry] and comes out a clear winner". Carl Harrison-Ford commented in his 1974 review that the work displayed "fine and assured pieces which demonstrate clearly how strong and individual her voice is". Others described the work as having "a frenetic energy and impatience" (Gray and Lehmann 163) and an "intense and very controlled emotional subjectivity and a concern with self and identity only just kept from hysteria by the restraint of physical sensation" (R. Jones 46).

In a 1975 interview with Sandra McGrath for *Vogue Australia*, Viidikas agreed that her poetry was “feminist” and that there was “a need for women to step out and reveal what they are about”. Men, she added, drew on their intellectual capabilities at the expense of their emotional lives; she argued that her poetry was as relevant for men as for women because “few women have expressed themselves” using intuitive and emotional modes (“4 Australian Poets”).

However, reviewer Barry Andrews evidenced disdain for feminine excess and hysteria (precisely the effect Viidikas sought) in his damning statement: “[h]er poems are (in a creative sense) ‘drunken’ collages and often inaccessible to a reader who must suffer the excesses of her randomness”. Under his words on her copy of this review in her private papers Viidikas printed in large capitals: “BLAM”.

Viidikas told de Berg that her writing was “really confessional”. She added, “I more or less write it off the top of my head, straight off, in one go [...] My writing is done at any time of the day or night, it’s quite a spontaneous thing” (*Conversation*). Her critique of American poet Denise Levertov’s writing is found in Jennings’ *Mother*. Commenting on the poet’s skill in a poem titled “To Levertov, To the Tradition”, Viidikas writes: “[s]o many words, she / threads them, carefully / like jewels”. But later in the poem she adds, “[i]t is her alone, she is / only one / with her head supporting the ball; / yet another/ in the tradition / of the artefact/ replacing life” (525), implying that Levertov’s poems were sometimes contrived works of art rather than spontaneous representations of “life”.

The second volume, *Wrappings*, continues the search for meaning in a series of prose poems and short stories. Her work becomes much more than an unburdening, as described to De Berg. In addition to its confessional and autobiographical elements, it uses open forms and chaotic connections, allowing it to be read through an experimental aesthetic. I have commented elsewhere that the dialogue between Viidikas and Michael Wilding in their respective writings creates a unique discontinuous, question-and-answer, comment-and rejoinder, experimental narrative, notably self-conscious and intertextual (“Tweed Jackets and Virgin Sock-washers”).

In order to explore the disjunction between language and meaning, the literary effects Viidikas employs include obfuscation and opacity. In the title poem, “A Part Dialogue About Wrappings”, the narrator writes: “Through a tear in the wrapping/ they touch at vulnerability, recoil quickly, / the innocent get burned” (*W* 68). But who are “they?” Why are they innocent? And how can vulnerability burn the innocent? Or is the one “touched” the innocent one? These are seemingly not transparent, answerable questions, and we are left with an effect of rupture.

Adding to its nebulousness, the poem’s soundscape plays with a duality of meaning by using the word “tear”, meaning both a rent in an outer layer (the wrapping) and “tear” as water running from the eye. In the final stanza an echo of the confusion of “tear” is playfully thrown back into the poem, with: “[t]hese wrappings are extremely interesting, said the psychiatrist, / poking at a pool of tears” (69).

Teresa De Lauretis defines subjectivity as “patterns by which experiential and emotional contents, feelings, images, and memories are organized to form one’s self image, one’s sense of self and others, and of our possibilities of existence” (5). In a continual exploration of subjectivity the self-reflexivity of Viidikas’ writing evidences these patterns through the narrator, who is often represented as marred, vulnerable and changing.

In another story from *Wrappings*, “Reality Fragments”, Viidikas expresses this notion as a “blowing apart”. She addresses her narrator’s subjectivity as “this reality, these bits” (*W* 98). The story begins breathlessly, using the image of the mirror as a mechanism for shattering the self, when usually a mirror might be used as a means of creating a sense of self: “All this reality, these bits, you have to find a way of addressing yourself to the mirror, a way of getting it together and blowing it apart, then catching the pieces if you can” (*W* 98). This passage expresses contradictions such as those that Anne Cranny-Francis argues may contribute to a person’s subjectivity. One’s subjectivity, Cranny-Francis maintains, is constituted from a matrix of pluralities that ebb and flow depending on external social, political and economic circumstances, and at any one time these subject positions “may be inconsistent or even in contradiction with one another” (7).

The year after *Wrappings* was published, Viidikas worked with young movie director, Stephen Wallace, on a short story from it. Together they transformed "Getting It All Together" (*W* 33-38) into a 26-minute film entitled *Break-Up*, a finalist in the Greater Union Awards at the Sydney Film Festival in 1976. Illuminating a particular moment in literary, filmic and historical time, the movie displays an experimental style, incorporating ad-libbing and slow shots sometimes lasting ten seconds or more. The scenes are not sequenced in linear time and convey a series of anarchic impressions rather than a clear line of narrative, echoing the fragmentary style of *Wrappings*.

The intersection of the film, the text and a cameo appearance by the real-life author results in a poignant moment for the viewer. During the party scene, accompanied by the words of Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again", the camera pans past Viidikas playing herself, rolling a joint and smiling. This scene underlines the experimental nature of Wallace and Viidikas' work. "Oh, mama, can this really be the end?": Dylan's line echoes the thoughts of the protagonist Mary, expressing her vulnerability as she walks outside into the courtyard, asking, "I'm enjoying myself, aren't I?"

Elizabeth Grosz argues in "Inscriptions and Body Maps" that the body is "a place of inscription, a tool for writing in culturally specific ways" (62). Drenched with corporeal language and metaphor that speaks to Cixous' call in "The Laugh of the Medusa" to write wherein "my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs" (226), the stories in *Wrappings* combine physicality and affect to create such a "place of inscription".

In the last piece in *Wrappings*, "The Incomplete Portrait", Viidikas employs rhythm and dissonant rhyme for effect. Consider this sentence about the narrator's body, with its use of syncopated rhythm mimicking jazz or scat, and see the refusal of conventional meanings when she juxtaposes sadness and semen, grave emotion beside bodily fluid and sex. She generates a similar effect with the internal rhyme of the words "infected" and "resurrected": "[my] body drapes itself on a chair this loved, hated, sometimes infected, resurrected body; this receptacle of sadness and semen, of blood, celebration, distortion" (*W* 125).

At the end of "The Incomplete Portrait" the narrator contemplates sexuality with vexation: "[t]he female fiction writer will be dealing in areas of bitterness; she'll be making phone calls to her sexuality to see how she's all wired up" (*W* 126). The corporeality of Viidikas' work runs through *Wrappings* like Adamson's pulsing blood, right until, in the very last line, the narrator begs for the page to become embodied. Employing a confrontational metaphor the line reads, "[t]he page should fuck back - I can't think of a more reasonable premise" (27).

In a 1974 review of *Wrappings* in the *Digger*, Helen Garner described it as written with "a background of knowingness against which the occasional sharp flash of sensual or emotional delight shows the more brilliantly for being unexpected".

I would disagree that the flashes are occasional. A close reading of *Wrappings* reveals writing packed with sensuality, emotion and irony, navigating the terrain of female subjectivity and sexuality. The story "Getting It All Together" is just five pages long, the plot anarchic and non-linear, with action and emotion packed into every word. Strategies such as the use of sentence fragments, abstraction and informal language contrast with complex imagery and poetic effect, continuing Viidikas' determination to contradict and disrupt. The work vividly expresses a range of emotions swinging from anger, pain and hopelessness to wry humour and intense passion.

Reviews of *Wrappings* evidenced similar variations to those of *Condition Red*, ranging from a masculine inability to understand her work, to a feminist appreciation of her fiction. Reviewer David Gilbey did not like the volume on first reading, arguing that it was too fragmentary with "no sense of completeness or a pattern of human experience", indicating that while he wanted stories that provided him with "fulfillment", he read it as being, disappointingly, about disillusionment. However, he admitted, while it was "rag-ended and unpretty", it had a "kind of impact and engagement" and a "tough honesty" in each of the "finely written stories" (457).

Rod McConchie, perhaps missing the point, accused "Viidikas' evocations, metaphoric skills and feeling for concrete detail" with being "self-regarding and indulgent", adding, "the lack of imaginative

and critical control reduces much of her work to a fashionable pulpiness” with the “glib pretensions of the creative writing class” (85). In fact Viidikas had never studied English past secondary school level, and never attended creative writing classes (*Conversation*).

Hal Colebatch’s opinion varied from “memorable” and “interesting” to “clichés and inconsistent imagery”. Colebatch admitted that “[o]ccasionally, Miss Viidikas attempts to break out of her realism with a flash of imaginative colour” (73-4). Brian Kiernan reviewed *Wrappings* as a “composed collection” written with “imaginative intelligence”, but argued that it had an “agonised late Romantic tension underlying its rejection of bourgeois security and its searching of latter-day bohemian experience” (38). Allan Moulton wrote “it is often sad, maudlin and depressing but it is never boring”. Daryl Douglas argued that she had “a capacity to observe and describe her own passions and fears and conflicts without losing her sense of balance or her sense of humour”. Helen Frizzell seemed to misunderstand Viidikas’ writerly intention altogether: “[t]he stories are on the whole unsatisfactory. Many deal with the drug culture. The prose too, seems drugged, over-mannered and over-poetic. It does not know where it is going, is hallucinatory and half-dazed” (17). Syed Amanuddin was even more puzzled: *Wrappings* was a “strange array of possibly intended confusion”. John Tittensor wrote: “*Wrappings* is a fragmentary and inverted narcissistic assemblage of wilfully unsustainable banalities” (166). Viidikas saved every review, sometimes with her added comments, in her *Papers* held in the Australian Defence Force Academy library. Underneath this last one she penned a short poem in pencil:

Stand up
Ly [sic] down
Stay Down
– Tittensor
can’t write a menu card himself

As Viidikas maintained in the interview with Sandra McGrath, the stories were written from a woman’s point of view about issues that concerned women but she wanted them to be accessible to both men and women (“4 Australian Poets”). Someone who understood this point was Anne Summers, who wrote in her review, “[s]he peels away those layers of fraud, façade and fabrication which people drape across their precarious selves to try to survive the desperate meanderings of a ritualised liberated life-style” (24). Susan Higgins (Sheridan) also understood what Viidikas was trying to do: “[s]he insists on writing her own truths, refusing to mythologise herself or give male readers the opportunity to mythologise her” but writes as a “sensuous, passionate being” (420).

Wrappings could be described as a single author anthology or a loosely linked collection of short pieces. With its innovative use of white space, broken lineage, uneven lengths for pieces, a mix of prose and poetry inside and beside each other, the first-person voice to create attachment and the second-person voice to create a feeling of intimacy with the reader, the whole of *Wrappings* works together as an experimental discontinuous narrative.

Higgins maintained that Viidikas provided the reader with only “tentative resolutions” (420), as in “Getting It All Together”, which ends: “[w]alking down an alley, things had got themselves together. Okay. The sun was coming up. Streets led into streets” (*W* 38). This ending speaks to Cixous’ idea of a female text as never-ending, “aimless, endless and pointless [...] it never concludes [...] What happens is an infinite circulation of desire from one body to the next” (“*Textes*” 18). This is a “circulation of desire”, I would add, from reader to narrator, as we accompany Mary on her journey down the street, away from her lover.

While Viidikas continued to write and publish in journals and little magazines, it was not until 1978 that her next single-author volume of poetry, *Knäbel*, was published. While an exploration of the “circulation of desire” continues in *Knäbel*, its central theme is the exploration of female subjectivity through recreational drugs and the search for New Age awareness. Influences that contributed to this later work included the experimental writing by other poets in the early 1970s, the writing of the American Beat poets and the counter-culture with its explorations of drug culture, New Age awareness and sexuality, and periods of travel to India.

Interest in mysticism, whether drug-induced or not, was strong in the 1970s. Writing retrospectively, Wilding reminisces about the fascination with New Age spiritual awareness: “[t]he ’60s. ’70s. The literary life. The search for experience, expanded consciousness, transcendence, oblivion” (“Neglecting the Body” 242). Some writers used drugs to enhance consciousness, promote personal growth and enact social change. Wilding lists writers through history who have used opium, heroin, Benzedrine, cannabis, mescaline and LSD, among them William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Aldous Huxley (“Drug Testing Prizewinners” 3). Patricia Dobrez agrees that poet Michael Dransfield and his contemporaries, following in this tradition, were intent on creating “the imaginative force of the moment”; they worked from altered states of consciousness in order to write poetry “in phases of innocence and savage disillusionment” (21).

Following the example of other drug poets, Viidikas experimented with mind-altering drugs during the writing of *Knäbel*. She told interviewer Peter Blazey:

In those days taking psychedelics was the one chance you had of having a mystical experience. You lost your personal awareness of the personal self (I), and became the impersonal self (that). (“Life Under a Banyan Tree”)

The poetry in *Knäbel* evidences increasing density and obscure meanings. The first stanza from “Strong Wash” invokes the influence of LSD with its image of hot days and stoned nights: “Hey now snakey / gris gris nights and lizard days / the red hot mutter sigh cleaves / tangerine high and saffron thighs”. Further illustrating this sensibility, after “these nights of sweat and fog / understand the devil skin”, the poem ends with an inexplicable, almost nonsensical couplet: “Hey fire thing I gasp / you fume tomatoes dice and all” (K 10).

Viidikas refers to heroin, “the deadly mistress, scag, the wicked hag,” in “A Modern Snowwhite”, a devastating story in Suzanne Falkiner’s 1985 collection, *Room to Move*. The narrator muses on the attractions of heroin: “[t]he White Lady gave heat which flushed through the body with crystalline clarity”. Then the speaker slips into the second person to explain further “the hype of taboo [which] made it essential and exclusive – you always wanted more, your satisfaction was never complete, your joy was realised in strictest privacy [...] You moved in a sub-group which believed they had a unique edge on reality” (131).

Heather Falkner commented, in her review of *Room to Move*, “Viidikas gets power out of a dense and wordy technique”, but added that all in all, the stories made “pretty dull subject matter”. Replying to the “dull” comment, Viidikas scrawled across her clipping of the review: “I think my story ‘A Modern Snowwhite’ about heroin isn’t suicidal stuff, and it’s definitely not dull. What female writer has addressed this in Australia?”

Viidikas relates how “Rehabilitation” in *Knäbel* was written after a spell of heroin-taking, and prompted her to go back to writing, because “writing itself was a drug, it was something much more positive [than heroin]” (*Conversation*). The poem speaks of the strong attraction the narrator has for heightened sensation:

Getting there always, the difficulty of sensation
and what its end result is, these lapses of confidence
and purpose / all experience yawning, wanting escape and
full abandonment, going off at high speed to some other
phased reality / wanting more, more [...] (K 11)

The strength of this volume is its frankness in illuminating the “nods, mumbles, fevers, aches” (K 11) of the drug scene. After closing it, readers might feel as if they are climbing out of a hallucinatory nightmare.

Knäbel recounts dreams, memories and experiences and bemoans the difficulty, or impossibility, of true and accurate representation of these dreams, memories and experiences. It contains drug-filled allusions to shattered subjectivities, employing even more dense imagery than in the first two volumes, and often using nature as a vehicle for hallucinatory exploration. As in *Wrappings* and *Condition Red*, the writer claims that words are never enough to express desire. *Knäbel*’s theme of

grief at the gap/rupture/dislocation between words, experience and meaning renders it at times nihilistic.

Reviews of *Knäbel* are difficult to find. Again, they are mixed. While Livio Dobrez admires Viidikas' rendition of her subject as a "woman [who] must be herself" and express self acceptance (130), Christopher Pollnitz claims that Viidikas leaves her language "unshaped, chaotic or simply inaccurate" although he does admit that her "talent is for imagery" (470).

The last published volume of Viidikas' work, *India Ink: A Collection of Prose Poems Written in India*, represents a further loss of "the personal self", as Viidikas described the experience to Peter Blazey ("Life Under a Banyan Tree"). The narrator navigates the experiences and emotions of an Australian woman travelling in India. A current analysis of *India Ink* answers critic Robert Dixon's contemporary call to "explore and elaborate the many ways in which the national literature has always been connected to the world" (20).

The pieces in *India Ink* accumulate into another discontinuous narrative, interrogating both the lives of Indian women and an Australian woman travelling alone in the sub-continent. In a visit to India in 1977, Viidikas told reporter Radhakrishnan that she was writing "a series of adventures and realisations by a woman and the particular sort of problems that beset women only" ("Young Australian Poet"). This fourth volume does not convey a romantic notion of the East; rather, the whole is a fierce representation of women's sexuality, of oppression and gender roles within the life of India.

Viidikas represents all of these as "the mother", "Mother", "Kali" or "Goddess" through an array of imagery. Women as mothers on a train journey, singing to babies: "who never seemed to sleep" ("Train Song 1", 10). The moon as woman: "[o]n a filmy full moon night the lady is orange through the sky" ("Friday Pooja (Pondicherry)", 12). Woman as goddess: "[o]h Goddess, where are You now that we need You most? [...] Oh Mother, was our need any different way back before history?" ("Kalahasti Isvara (Andhra Pradesh)", 13). Women as wives: "Oriya wives pound their rags on a washing stone by the sewer, their children grow up thin as sparks of Mother Kali's flame [...]" ("Cuttack (Orissa)", 15). And on another train journey:

His wife sits silent, never introduced, her solemn face nurses the baby,
the food bundles, the commitment of marriage ... Oh the seriousness
of her stare, the redness of the *tilak* bleeding over her third eye.
("Glimpse", 24)

The volume culminates in frustration and disillusionment with the Indian notion of the Goddess mother. It is a self-referencing piece raging perhaps at travellers whose understanding of these "foreign shores" will remain always opaque, and at a society that oppresses its women so shamefully. The last paragraph of "Khetwadi 10 (Bombay)" ends:

The Goddess has learnt to take it all: these days She eats offerings
and keeps the distribution for Herself, knows the songs of Hindi films,
clothes Her feet in nylon frills – She's out to kill and asks for more on
foreign shores, disrupts the law of food, shelter, dignity ... While the
monsoon rains down shame, on love, Her filthy name. (57)

The melody created by the rhyming of words in this piece demonstrates an interesting re-visitation of the experimental scat rhythms used in some of Viidikas' earlier work.

The final poem, "Cannibal Goddess", is for Kali, goddess of creation, preservation and destruction. It is a savage, admiring, fatalistic poem to "an unlimited She" that begins:

Kali
Cuts the air with Her knife
She's
the blackness, *kala*,
an open night and day
of power, *mantra*

[...]
Her heart is a jewel
Her feet turn the earth
She's the spoke of destiny,
the final word on life,
a black hole
of love
Kali (58-59)

The last word in the book is thus *Kali*, giving the whole volume its theme: woman/goddess/mother and death.

Adrian Rawlins' 1984 review of *India Ink* saw a new way of writing about India, arguing, "[n]o Australian writer before Miss Viidikas has seen as much of India as clearly and rendered it as tellingly as she does in this book" (31).

Poet Geoff Page's review suggested that *India Ink* read as "polished journal entries" (73). Perhaps the use of place names for titles presaged for Page the genre of a journal, but with their mixture of lyricism and savage tonality I would argue that the pieces are much more. Their insights convey a carefully observed picture of the poverty and inequality that the narrator sees in Indian society, even as questions of Western essentialising and appropriation are at play.

An examination of Viidikas' manuscripts and papers shows that she continued to write copiously until her untimely death in 1998, although there were no more single author volumes. The last short story she published was in *The Phoenix Review* (1990), "Letter to an Unknown Prisoner", about the impossibility of freedom, "that incorrigible weapon" (65), which editor Barry Scott has included in his 2010 collection. Previously unpublished writing in *New and Rediscovered* includes work written over three decades: poems, a dozen short stories and an extract from the novel.

Wilding describes how, towards the end of her life, "[s]he began to slide away from us, or we from her. Increasingly it was the world of the Cross, of hard drugs, of opiates, dependency, the twilight demi-monde that claimed her, or that she claimed" ("Mere Anarchy" 17).

In a tribute to Viidikas' work and in remembrance of her first poem, "At East Balmain", Robert Adamson wrote a poem about her life, work and death titled "For Vicki Viidikas" in 2000. It begins:

East Balmain, the ferry wharf, dragon flies
and killer prawns hovering
above and below their reflections
on the harbour's milky surface
after rain. We knew there was no such
thing as death and felt good about that knowledge,
though where did we get it from?
You thought any form of flattery
was the rhetoric that killed poems;
now you are dead, there's no 'other side'
although maybe you're back
as something not so human" [...] ("three poems")

Adamson's eulogy resonates with Viidikas' very first poem about the harbour, death and the dead rat. In homage to her juxtaposition of contradictory ideas, Adamson oddly combines "killer" and "prawns" to convey a new creature of the sea, a satirical meaning of how we might perceive prawns, perhaps as a metaphor for death. He also pays homage to Viidikas' representations of subjectivities as complex, depicting those "killer prawns", not as single entities, but split by their reflections (perhaps an acknowledgement of Viidikas' many mirrors) into multiple images.

When Viidikas died, poet and friend Gig Ryan described her work in an obituary as "an integral part of the rich flowering in Australian poetry that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, part of an extraordinarily talented generation" (20).

The 1970s literary project of new voices engaged with the politics of representation played out against a backdrop of a developing Australian feminist literary theory. Reading Viidikas today crosses a historical boundary of thirty years but her work still speaks in some ways to contemporary theory.

The strength of her work lies in her innovative use of imagery, form and structure and her deconstructive approach to the way in which language can be a vehicle for ideas, subjectivity and attachment. The relationship she explored between language and meaning, and the questioning, confrontational aspect of her work opened up new fictional and poetic ground for women's writing. *New and Rediscovered* illustrates how Viidikas' work speaks to contemporary writing while flagging a particular time in Australian literature.

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NOTE

[1] A typewritten, annotated version of *Kali and the Dung Beetle* is housed in the Viidikas collection (Special Collections) ADFA Library, Canberra.