



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

TEXT

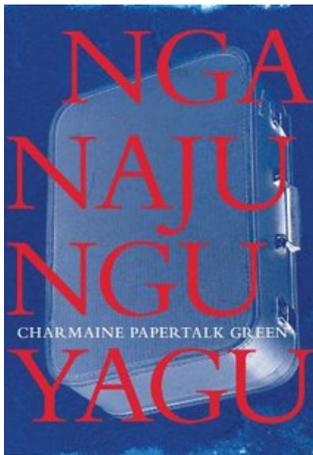
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

TEXT review

**Nganggunmanha:<sup>1</sup> Papertalk Green's gifts to life writing, visual poetry and more**

*review by Amelia Walker*



Charmaine Papertalk Green  
*Nganajungu Yagu*  
Cordite Books, Carlton South VIC 2019  
9780648511601  
Pb 73pp AUD20.00

*Acknowledgement: this review was written on the lands of the Kurna people. I pay respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially elders, past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, always will be Aboriginal land.*

*Special thanks to Professor Jeanine Leane for reading a draft of this article and sharing her expertise on issues of cultural sensitivity.*

Ngatha nganajungu yagu nganggurnmanha

I am still thinking about you my mother

Ngatha nganajungu mama nganggurnmanha

My father I am still thinking about you (4)

Charmaine Papertalk Green's *Nganajungu Yagu*<sup>2</sup> enacts a movingly profound re-membering of correspondence and connection between the author and her mother [henceforth yagu] across 1978-9 while Papertalk Green (the daughter/gaja) was staying at an Aboriginal girls' hostel and attending high school in Bentley, Perth. As Anita Heiss notes, this new work adds to Papertalk Green's impressive oeuvre, which extends back to the mid-1980s and comprises bold writings that remain 'eloquently powerful, respectfully challenging, and true to [Papertalk Green's] role in life as a Yamaji Nyarlu' (Heiss 2019: xiii). In line with Heiss, I see *Nganajungu Yagu* as a book that in addition to its vital insights about 'respect for ancestors, connection to country, the role of the poet and Yamaji identity' enacts an accomplished revival of 'the nearly lost art of letter writing' (Heiss 2019: xiii) and epistolary literature – a form powerfully deployed by feminist and anti-colonial writers including Alice Walker (1982), Monica Ali (2003) and Michael Ondaatje (1987) (see discussion in Bower 2017). In this review, I would like to extend Heiss' point further by observing how *Nganajungu Yagu* profoundly reimagines literary possibilities of life writing, historical writing, fictocriticism, poetry and more. My touchstones for this argument shall include, first, Papertalk Green's use of letters in combination with other texts, and then the poetic innovations she enacts, particularly visual and polylingual strategies. My decision to focus primarily on technique is informed by Alison Whittaker's edifying keynote at the 2019 conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (Whittaker 2019).<sup>3</sup>

In her author's preface to *Nganajungu Yagu*, Papertalk Green explains how '[f]orty years ago, words and feelings flowed between a teenage daughter and her mother' (xi) and how she, the daughter, carefully stored and protected the letters her yagu sent her in a 'red life-journey suitcase' that she 'carried across time and landscapes as a mother would carry her baby in a thaga'<sup>4</sup> (xi). The letters Papertalk Green sent her yagu in response were lost, so in *Nganajungu Yagu* Papertalk Green reimagines and re-members them – reinstates membership to memories and experiences at risk of being dismembered and/as forgotten.<sup>5</sup> The first letter appears on page twelve. It is preceded by a prose opening (1-2) that elaborates details on how and why Papertalk Green came to be living at the hostel, her experiences there, and the broader socio-historical context in which the events of this book took place. Ten pages of poetry then provide a sense of the emotions Papertalk Green's teenaged "I" experienced in leaving her home and loved ones, interspersed with current-day reflections on what the letters meant to her. She writes:

These are not just letters on paper

these are mother's letters to me

her daughter, blood, her hopes

These are not letters on paper

that can be crumpled and discarded  
a long line of forever flowing blood  
of Yamaji women bound together  
from a continuous womb of love (8)

The first letter is dated 28 June 1978. It appears as three lines, set in italics at the top of the page. In this letter, Papertalk Green's yagu explains that she has sent a check for Papertalk Green's glasses. The letter also expresses parental concern – and boundless love (12). Beneath the letter, Papertalk Green, writing decades later, reimagines her response through a mixture of prose and poetry. The response begins in the style of epistolary discourse:

Nganajungu Yagu,

Thank you for sending me the money for new glasses and worrying about my eyesight. I did get shame when I became a teenage four-eyes... (12)

This then folds into a seeming interior monologue of thoughts and responses the letter cannot hold:

Foureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyes  
Yalba guru yalba guru yalba guru yalba guru yalba guru yalba (12)

The teenager as grown woman then reflects across time and distance:

Over the past forty years them glasses gurugilaaji ones  
helped me see so many things outside small little town  
opened my eyes they did as a teenager, mother, woman (12)

This play with time and memory is a feature throughout the book.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent letters appear, like the first one, as brief italicised fragments in response to which teenaged and adult versions of *Nganajungu Yagu*'s "I" take turns to speak in dialogue with Yagu, one another, and the myriad other voices that perfuse this sophisticated-yet-utterly readable book, including voices of Papertalk Green's other family and community members, as well as the institutional, domineering voices of the invader culture against which *Nganajungu Yagu*'s central figure struggles. In addition to her yagu's letters, Papertalk Green incorporates historical accounts including quotes from a West Australian "Native" (sic) "(Citizenship Rights) Regulation Form" (39-43) and photographs of official stamps reflecting the 'black history' (and present) (Pearson 2016) this land problematically still referred to as "Australia" still bears. Together, Papertalk Green's careful curation of different texts, styles, temporalities, voices and languages makes for an accomplished symphony via which the author illuminates the fine details and big issues of the historic and/as present circumstances *Nganajungu Yagu* portrays.

Having discussed Papertalk Green's skilled integration of letters with other textual materials, I now turn from the macro to the micro – from the structure to its parts – to consider *Nganajungu Yagu*'s poetic innovations. Though Papertalk Green exhibits formal prowess in multiple areas, the two I am focussing on are visual and multilingual elements. In each of these Papertalk Green expands the scope for contemporary poetics, providing much for readers to relish and much from which poets may learn.

As multilingual poet and mailartist<sup>7</sup> John M Bennet points out, all poetry is visual in some way (2016: 12). Use (and non-use) of line and stanza breaks influence where readers pause, where eyes are drawn, and the rhythms that come forth aloud or in the head. This in turn affects which words or lines gain emphasis, which ideas are grouped together or separated, and more. The term visual poetry is, however, typically used to denote genres and practices of poetry that especially foreground this element through incorporation, for instance, of typographical elements, diagrams, symbols and/or the arrangement of text in non-linear ways. These include differing approaches of and to asemic poetry, pattern poetry, concrete poetry and more (Bennet 2016: 12-13). Ecopoetry and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry are also genres that also exploit visual techniques, particularly via the inclusion or omission of typeless spaces as devices capable of holding as much or more meaning than explicitly printed words and symbols (Walker 2019). A similar approach is seen in Papertalk Green's poems 'Journey Beginning Things' (6) and 'Messages' (7), which sit on opposite pages in *Nganajungu Yagu* and bear a striking parallelism of shape. Both begin with four stanzas aligned hard left after which the final section of the poem leaps out to the right – still left-aligned, but set at a very wide indent so that the words begin at the same horizontal position as where the previous stanza ended. Vertically, there is also a big jump, or in other words, many lines of typeless space. This gives the sense of the poem's endings having been cut off or separated, which in 'Journey...' forges a soulful visual analogy to the final lines:

The teenaged girl  
leaving on her own  
with her red coolamon (6)

and in 'Messages' echoes thoughts of:

thana gagurlimanha:  
separating from each other  
moving apart away:  
thana gagurlimanha (7).

Taking a different approach, but still incorporating much typeless space, the poem 'Paper Love' (10) is set in the middle of the page and consists mostly of one word lines, making for a thin vertical column broken occasionally by a five-to-eight word line. These could be branches extending from a tree or arms reaching out for love. There is also the possible thought of railway tracks or intersecting roads on a map – of how letters travelled between

yagu and gaja.<sup>8</sup> Also striking in this poem is the bolded and italicised repetition of ‘-nha’, a Wajarri suffix indicating past tense (65) and ‘-manha’ for present tense (64). A reader focusing on just these words and their translations may think, *past, past, past – present, present, present*, and thus reflect on how the past remains present and everything with us remains present as past. This temporal emphasis resurges a few pages later in ‘Walgajumanha All Time’, which, in contrast to ‘Paper Love’ features long horizontal lines of text grouped into two-line stanzas with large areas of typeless space between stanzas. Flowing through these spaces is the repeated word ‘walgajunmanha’, which zig zags diagonally like a river or a snake. It means ‘writing’. Its visual deployment in the poem suggests the idea of writing into and from spaces of silence or erasure. It also reflects how writing can honour memory and bear witness to histories – including subjugated histories and/as knowledges – forging and maintaining crucial connections between people, communities and cultures:

We write about our existence pre-invasion / and that has made us visible  
We write about our existence during invasion / and that keeps us visible (14)

Elsewhere, Papertalk Green employs visual techniques more commonly associated with concrete poetry, including boxes that contain and/or segregate sections of text. In ‘I Understand I Know’ (21), which uses three long narrow boxes, the sense of ordering and being boxed in is further heightened by the arrangement of words into lists as though they have literally been rounded up and forced into line(s). The five pages of the long poem ‘Cultural Genocide’ (39-43) similarly deploy their boxes (one per page) in ways that emphasise the domineering constraints of invader bureaucracy while also serving to signal the idea of filling out a section on a form. The text in each box responds to a question from a regulation form – heinous questions such as ‘Has the Applicant DISSOLVED tribal (sic) and native (sic) association for two years except for respect to lineal descendant or native relations of the first degree?’ (39). In each of the boxes placed below these questions, there seems far more to say than can fit into the small space given. The words strain at the perimeters of the boxes while the conspicuous space surrounding each box speaks loudly of how much remains unsaid.

Papertalk Green’s use of techniques drawn from multiple visual poetic traditions (of ecopoetry, concrete poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and more) is mirrored in the polylingual strategies via which she manages the feat of writing across five languages: Wajarri, Badimaya, Aboriginal English, English and Spanish. As per the book’s preface, the inclusion of Wajarri and Badimaya is especially significant because language is significantly connected with culture and keeping language alive serves to ‘honour ancestors, language centres, language workers and those Yamaji who have been and remain generous in passing on cultural knowledge’ (xi). Some poems, such as ‘Bushbroom’ (33) are written entirely in Wajarri, while others intersperse words, lines or phrases of multiple languages together. For readers who understand English but are unfamiliar with Wajarri, Badimaya and/or Aboriginal English, Papertalk Green provides glossaries (63-69) through which it is possible to translate and slowly make sense (the Spanish is translated in-text). Being such a reader, I found the

slow, attentive processes of turning and returning between poems and glossary a precious and enriching one. I remain aware that there is yet much beyond what I have accessed – subtleties of culture and inflection readable only to those who have studied longer and/or belong to the community. Nonetheless, as I go back and back to these poems I realise a few new things each time as words seen multiple times gradually become familiar. For instance, only the third time I returned to the untitled poem that ends with the line ‘Gudurdu warritharra’ (36) repeated three times could I appreciate this two-word repetition as a visual lub-dub or heartbeat. Because ‘gudurdu’ means ‘heart’ (63) and ‘warritharra’ means ‘sorrow, pangs of unhappiness’ (65), this raises the idea of a heart that keeps beating despite pain – an image of strength, determination and survival despite the odds, and just one example of the new ideas and possibilities Papertalk Green’s skilful integration of multiple languages have opened and keep opening to me as a non-Aboriginal person born on Aboriginal (Kurna) land. These are gifts of writing/reading for which I feel humbly grateful.

In combination with its visual devices and sophisticated integration of epistolary writing with multiple creative, critical and historical modes of text, *Nganajungu Yagu*’s polylingual strategies make for a seriously accomplished work that begs for repeated reading and re-reading. It is a book with the capacity to change thought and writing. It opens new possibilities across literary practices including but exceeding life writing, historical writing and poetry of multiple forms. *Nganajungu Yagu* strikes a deep affect that compels ethical responsiveness and drives crucial political points. It is certainly more than ‘Just Letters’ (9): it is a testimony, a re-membering, a keeping-alive and honouring of what must not be forgotten:

Gudurdu warritharra  
 Gudurdu warritharra  
 Gudurdu warritharra (36)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ‘Nganggunmanha’ is listed in Papertalk Green’s Wajarri Glossary as ‘remembering’ (65).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Nganajungu’ = ‘my, mine’; ‘Yagu’ = ‘mother’ (64, 65).

<sup>3</sup> During question and answer time, Whittaker was asked the question of which questions she wishes she would be asked more often. After a brief pause, she reflected that as a ‘Gomeri multitasker from the floodplains of Gunnedah’ (Whittaker 2018) she grows tired of always asked to speak from an Aboriginal perspective and/or have her work received through this lens only. She said she would like, sometimes, to be asked for her thoughts on literary technique, and for greater recognition of technical innovation to be given to the works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. While I recognise that one member of a community does not necessarily reflect the views of a whole community – Papertalk Green may or may not share Whittaker’s stance – I found the point a salient one for informing critical practice. As a reviewer, I have here in good faith tried my hardest to apply what I

learned from Whittaker’s keynote. Other reviewers will no doubt bring out the book’s political significance – which is immense – but I want to ensure that Papertalk Green’s technical feats also gain recognition, for this work does indeed extend literary practice and offers much from which aspiring writers may learn.

<sup>4</sup> The ‘beautiful wooden thaga (coolamon)’ is ‘used to carry precious loads such as water and babies’. In her book’s opening section, Papertalk Green explains how she, too ‘carried precious things in [her] thaga, the RJS [red-journal suitcase]’ and thereby ‘carried [her] memories in [her] thaga forward’ (1).

<sup>5</sup> Re-membering (restoring membership) is an important concept in life-writing, especially the life writing(s) of marginalised groups, e.g. women and colonised peoples, who have historically been dis-membered or cut off from society, and whose lived experiences and/as histories it is important to reinstate (see Jeffries 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Though I have not chosen to pursue it in this review, this opens the possibility of considering *Nganajungu Yagu* in relationship to *écriture féminine* [feminine writing] that likewise plays with time and narrative ordering (see Atkinson 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Mailart is ‘a movement based on the principle of sending small scale works through the postal service’ (Tate nd)

<sup>8</sup> ‘Gaja’ = ‘offspring, child, daughter’ (63)

## Works cited

Ali, M 2003 *Brick Lane*, Scribner, New York

Atkinson, M 2014 ‘Strange body bedfellows: *Écriture féminine* and the poetics of trans-trauma’, *TEXT* 18, 1: <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april14/atkinson.htm>

Bennet, JM 2016 ‘Visual or Concrete Poetry’, *Aldus Society Notes* 16, 2: 12-13

Bower, R 2017 *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980-2010*, Palgrave / Springer, Cham

Heiss, A 2019 ‘Introduction’ in Charmaine Papertalk Green (author) *Nganajungu Yagu*, Cordite Books, Carlton South, xiii-xiv

Jeffries, M 2015 ‘Re-Membering Our Own Power: Occaneechi Activism, Feminism, and Political Action Theories’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 36, 1: 160-195

Pearson, L 2016 ‘White Australia has a black history – and Indigenous Australians like me had our country invaded not “discovered”’, @IndigenousX (30 March), reposted as ‘White Australia Still Has a Black History’, *Independent UK* (30 March 2016): <https://indigenousx.com.au/white-australia-still-has-a-black-history/> (accessed 21 April 2020)

Ondaatje, M 1987 *In the Skin of a Lion*, Vintage, New York

Tate nd 'Art Term – Mail Art', Tate: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/mail-art> (accessed 21 April 2020)

Walker, A 1982 *The Colour Purple*, Harcourt Brace, New York

Walker, A 2019 'Broken and open, cycling and re-cycling: poetry of the Australian rural landscape now', *TEXT* 23, 1: [https://www.textjournal.com.au/april19/walker\\_rev.htm](https://www.textjournal.com.au/april19/walker_rev.htm)

Whittaker, A 2018 *Blakwork*, Magabala Books, Broome WA

Whittaker, A 2019 Keynote Speech. The 24<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs: 'Writing Through', University of Technology, Sydney NSW (25 November): <http://www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/AAWP-Conference-Program-2019-Digital.pdf>

*Amelia Walker is an independent writer/researcher who has published four poetry books and three poetry teaching resource books. From 2017-2019 she was secretary of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). She is currently employed on a teaching-only contract at a South Australian university.*