

Reflection Statement
The Unfettered Soul

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My purpose in composing *The Unfettered Soul* was kindled by my desire to reveal the colour that exists in the black and white portrait of my great-grandmother, which hangs in the hallway of my grandmother's house. I seek to illuminate her experience during a time when women's voices were suppressed by dominating social attitudes. I envisage my work will resonate with those who seek to empathise with the experiences of women whose voices were suppressed by patriarchal social attitudes. My work will appeal to Australians with a multi-cultural heritage and be appreciated by those who wish to gain a deeper understanding of Italian culture and diasporic experiences. Due to the nature of my major work's form, I imagine it will be embraced by a secondary audience with interest in the contemporary Australian life writing genre, appealing to creative nonfiction publications such as *Kill Your Darlings*¹.

The Unfettered Soul is composed in the creative nonfiction form, a pastiche of historical recreation, hybridised with elements of portrait memoir. I consulted Lee Gutkind's *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*² to acquaint myself with the intricacies of the genre. My intention in composing in creative nonfiction is to create 'a universal and personal interpretation of truth'³, where my authorial presence is 'part of the story'⁴, hence my decision to craft my major work in first-person with an implied third-person limited voice, to create ambiguity between my own perspective and Esterina's. I do not reveal myself as the narrator until the final section, where upon visiting her village, I recount a 'moment of tactile empathy'⁵ where 'my hands are one with hers'⁶ as I encounter her dowry linen. I intend to create an authentic intimacy between myself as the author, Esterina as the subject and the reader. My reading of autobiographical writing by Italian female authors focused the lens through which I explore Esterina's life in rural Fascist Italy, where peasant women were heavily suppressed, and her radical move to a socially prosperous Milan, where post-war feminism was gaining prominence in the public-sphere. Natalia Ginzburg's collection of essays *The Little Virtues*⁷, particularly her question of 'what road' her sons 'will...choose to walk down', coupled with scholar Steph Lawler's assertion that

¹ "About KYD," Kill Your Darlings (Kill Your Darlings), <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/about-kyd/>. (n.d)

² Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction -- from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*. United States: Hachette Books, 2012.

³ Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction -- from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*. United States: Hachette Books, 2012.

⁴ Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction -- from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*. United States: Hachette Books, 2012.

⁵ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

⁶ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

⁷ Ginzburg, Natalia. *The Little Virtues*. United States: Arcade Pub., 1989.

'the perspective of the mother...has rarely been explored'⁸ in Italian literature inspired me to revive Esterina's multifaceted experience against a rigid social backdrop. My critical study of Jane Campion's film *Bright Star*⁹, her reimagining of Keats's Romantic poetry through Fanny Brawne's perspective, solidified my purpose of giving a voice to a woman suppressed by prevailing social conventions.

The cornerstone of *The Unfettered Soul* is the weaving of my grandfather and great-uncle's memories and inherited knowledge of their mother with wider historical research to contextualise Esterina's voice and remedy the subjectivity of family memories, acknowledging the shades of grey that existed in her world. In my recreation of the *Giornata delle Fede*, I explore a complex web of experiences of the same event, when women were called upon to donate their gold to the war effort - those 'enamored of their motherland'¹⁰ who wilfully obliged, those whose 'hearts...throb(bed)...with shame'¹¹. I acknowledge the moral ambiguity of these actions in the context of a fascist regime which preyed on those who, like my great-grandmother, were illiterate and received their news through the mouths of others, or by state-controlled radio broadcasts.

A rich vein of intertextuality enriches the meaning and impact of my major work, subliminally revealing contextual detail. To incorporate additional women's voices, I frame each section with a fragment of the 1934 poem *A Longing for Light Things*¹² by Antonia Pozzi. My work's title, *The Unfettered Soul*, and opening image of "houses of a distant island/ the colour of sails/ ready to set off" are derived from the poem. The resonance of images between my major work and the poem, particularly of boats and vessels, establishes the diasporic strand which suffuses the piece, and is intrinsically connected to Esterina's existence. My fascination with music as "an expression of human experience"¹³ kindled a strand of allusion in my piece, particularly to Mina Mazzini's 1965 songs *Se Telefonando* and *Un Bacio Troppo Poco*. I mingle her 'portrait of the emancipated woman'¹⁴ with Esterina's consciousness to avoid sentimentality in voice by

⁸ Fanning, Ursula. *Italian Women's Autobiographical Writings In The Twentieth Century: Constructing Subjects*. 1st ed. London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 2017.

⁹ Campion, Jane. *Bright Star*. DVD. Britain, France, Australia: BBC Films Screen, Australia, UK Film Council, New South Wales Film and Television Office Pathé. 2009.

¹⁰ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

¹¹ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

¹² Antonia Pozzi, "Poems by Antonia Pozzi," trans. Nicholas Benson, InTranslation. <https://intranslation.brooklynrail.org/italian/poems-by-antonia-pozzi/>. 2012.

¹³ John Blacking, "The Value of Music in Human Experience," *The Value of Music in Human Experience*, 1969.

¹⁴ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

contextualising the voices of other women, creating a multilayered, complex exploration of this period in history which anchored the second wave of feminism. I also allude to the aria *Un bel di, vedremo* from Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, subtly foreshadowing Lino's disappearance and the closure which Esterina will not be granted.

The manifestations of mortality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*¹⁵, studied in the preliminary Extension 1 course, resonate with my purpose in exploring the loss that pervaded Esterina's existence. Roy's metaphoric representation of 'The Loss of Sophie Mol' as something which 'stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks' emphasises the tragic undercurrent which flows through life after loss, causing an intergenerational ripple. Similarly to Roy, I weave a strand of mortality into my major work, catalysed by the disappearance of Esterina's brother and the death of her child, the loss transcending generations through the death of her grandchild. I explore mortality in a metaphorical sense through the thematic elements of loss of innocence through war and the upheaval of identity and 'homeland' through migration. Roy integrates the Malayalam language into her narrative as a way of revealing 'cultural truths', something which I emulate in my inclusion of fragments of the Friulian language and folklore in my major work to create cultural authenticity and contextual integrity. The legend of the *benandanti* and the *malandanti*, a 'fertility cult'¹⁶; who were 'defenders of harvests and the fertility of fields'¹⁷ contextualises the sanctity of the season's harvest, which determined the livelihood of the village. There is poignant irony in that this lifeblood was most likely the cause of Esterina's death from cancer, a 'symptom of exposure, a lifetime infusing the soil with chemicals to sustain life, to fill empty stomachs.'¹⁸ The connection between mortality and the seasons in my major work is consonant with Keats's poetic representation of mortality in his poem *To Autumn*¹⁹. I contrast these images of mortality with Esterina 'holding freshly laid eggs in her hands, still warm'²⁰ to convey how her memory lives on in the minds of her descendants.

While my major work is composed linearly, I contradict the tendency to perceive our ancestor's lives as wholly fluid by integrating elements of the fragmented style. Structurally, I segmented

¹⁵ Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*: Booker Prize Winner 1997. India: Penguin Books, 2002.

¹⁶ Ginzburg, Carlo, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Johns Hopkins University Press. 2013).

¹⁷ Ginzburg, Carlo, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Johns Hopkins University Press. 2013).

¹⁸ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

¹⁹ John Keats, "To Autumn by John Keats," Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44484/to-autumn>. 1820.

²⁰ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

my piece into suites of chronological vignettes which correspond with Esterina's stages of life and the passage of time. My reading of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*²¹, which is similarly fragmented into the narrator's stages of life, influenced this choice. I wished to emulate the 'fluid'²² linearity of the novel in a way that is 'not univocal'²³, leaving room for the reader to consider equivocal interpretations. I fuse this linearity with features of the fragmented narrative, such as memories, reflections and dreams. Esterina, for example, 'dreams in white' of her impending wedding, her reveries intruded with the imagined return of her missing brother. By incorporating these structural techniques, I mimic the nature of life and the human mind as something which is fractured, and not purely linear, and also seek to develop my imagined empathy with Esterina's perspective.

The authentic emotion harnessed by Sibilla Aleramo in the autobiographical novel *A Woman*²⁴ inspired me to sustain a mature yet unrestrained approach to dealing with the sensitivities of family history, particularly in Italian culture where loyalty to family is everything. Thus, I have become attuned to the shades of grey that existed within my great-grandmother's life and her larger social context. Aleramo's manipulation of the motif of disease²⁵ provides social commentary on dominant patriarchal attitudes, while revealing profound psychological truths about her life. This prompted me to create a motif of dowry in my piece. I depict Esterina embroidering her linen, which culturally signifies 'her becoming, her imminent womanhood'²⁶, creating contextual integrity and striving to represent larger social truths. Some scholars argue the embroidery of dowry linen allowed for self-expression²⁷, which I convey through Esterina 'translating her pain into motifs and monograms'²⁸, however, I could not neglect the critique of the practice as simultaneously suppressing the woman's identity, committing the woman to a life of expectations. their value determined by the "blood-stained sheets"²⁹ which they were obliged to hang from their windows the morning after their wedding night. I aim to represent the

²¹ Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein. Europa Editions. 2020.

²² Matteo Pericoli, "Elena Ferrante, My Brilliant Friend," The Paris Review. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/04/17/elena-ferrante-my-brilliant-friend/>. 2017.

²³ Matteo Pericoli, "Elena Ferrante, My Brilliant Friend," The Paris Review. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/04/17/elena-ferrante-my-brilliant-friend/>. 2017.

²⁴ Aleramo, Sibilla. *A Woman*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 2020.

²⁵ Fabio Girelli-Carasi, "Disease as Metaphor in Sibilla Aleramo's *Una Donna*," *Disease as Metaphor in Sibilla Aleramo's Una Donna* (Brooklyn College), accessed February 2, 2020, <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/modlang/carasi/publications/alermo.html>.

²⁶ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

²⁷ Sylvia Griffin, "Dowry Linen: A Personal Interpretation Through A Visual Art Practice - February 22" Contemporary Art and Feminism (Contemporary Art and Feminism, February 22, 2014), <https://contemporaryartandfeminism.com/archive/30-2014-exhibitions/58-dowry-linen-a-personal-interpretation-through-a-visual-art-practice-february-22-2014>. 2014.

²⁸ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

²⁹ *The Unfettered Soul*. 2020.

impossibility of this idealised life, fractured by reality and tragedy, embodied by the linen. In the final scene of the piece, I recall laying my head upon the pillowcase Esterina embroidered, an expression of empathy which transcends time and generations and has shaped my narrative voice.

The Unfettered Soul is an unrestrained amplification of my great-grandmother's voice, and by extension the voices of other women, who were suppressed by prevailing social and political realities. My major work is a creative expression of historicity, contributing to the creative non-fiction genre in a meaningful way that meditates life's dichotomies - light and darkness, hope and despair, love and loss. The composition process has both challenged and nurtured my skills as a writer, invigorating the portrait I have created of my great-grandmother's life.

I encourage each reader to add their own tile to the mosaic of vivid colours.