
Sweatshop Women
VOLUME ONE

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**Edited by Winnie Dunn with Foreword by Michelle Law**

An initiative of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement

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# FOREWORD

Something I ask myself often is whom, living or dead, I'd invite to my dream dinner party. My answer varies each time depending on who I'm feeling inspired by but one thing never changes: the attendees are always women of colour, whether they're leaders, artists, activists or relatives. Who would make better dinner companions than people with whom you can commiserate, relax and compare war stories? Who else could make better food? Sweatshop Women is my dream dinner party. It's an antidote to all of the stories stolen, appropriated and diluted by White and/or male voices and perspectives. These are the unadulterated words of women of colour at their most authentic and true.

I was honoured to be a guest facilitator at one of the Sweatshop Women workshops in 2018. I got to meet some of the brilliant authors published within. As a writer, I've led many classes and participated in even more, and what I've learnt is that writers can be precious people. They can be ego-driven, fragile and defensive, which is understandable. Writing is grueling, soul-baring work. But the women in this workshop were not of that ilk. They were frank and direct while critiquing each other's writing and they received criticism with grace and humility. That level of camaraderie, built upon mutual respect and trust, is rare. You

need to work for it. And this is what I adore about women of colour: they get shit done, which, as a writer is half the battle won.

I owe so much to women of colour. In fact, I wouldn't have become a writer if it weren't for one woman in particular who believed in my work enough to publish it. A decade ago, author Alice Pung selected a memoir essay I wrote for an anthology she was editing called *Growing Up Asian in Australia*. I was in my final year of high school at the time and grappling with being Chinese-Australian in a predominantly White town in regional Queensland. I grew up in the 1990s, when One Nation's racist rhetoric was king, so for most of my life I'd stifled my Chinese culture in order to survive. But once I sat down to write, the ease with which my personal story spilled from me was alarming. I'd never felt so qualified to write about something before.

After the essay was published, I enrolled in a creative writing degree and those feelings of qualification were overrun by feelings of inadequacy and displacement. I learnt about lofty and literary (aka White, male, and dead or nearly dead) writers who wrote only in English, who I believed I needed to emulate in order to be taken seriously as an author. That meant stifling my culture again. It meant writing through a White lens because it was 'neutral'. It meant rejecting languages that felt like home. This denial came to me so naturally. It was so easy to slip back into old habits. To slip back into invisibility.

I had to re-educate myself over many years (and continue to do so) in order to finally embrace my own voice. There was a lot of self-directed and rage-fuelled research into non-White forms

of storytelling, set periods of only reading CaLD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) writers in order to counterbalance my formal education while actively seeking out other PoC (People of Colour) writing peers with whom I could empathise. Over time, I learnt that I could write from my own perspective without feeling like I was being tokenistic or ghettoising my culture. I also learnt that existing in my body and speaking my truth was a political act whether I liked it or not but that did not mean I was a spokesperson for my culture. It was a necessary and liberating learning curve.

This anthology showcases some of Australia's finest and most exciting emerging writers. They all just happen to be Indigenous and CaLD women. In what will come as no surprise to the people who belong to CaLD communities, women of colour have never needed anyone to speak for them. Their voices have always been present and commanding, they've simply needed more platforms to be heard. It's my hope that this collection will surprise and entertain readers and bolster Indigenous, refugee and migrant women who have felt the compounding loneliness of being both women of colour and storytellers. Your stories are worthy. Share them. Make people sweat.

MICHELLE LAW

# INTRODUCTION: AYE SIS

I remember the first time I was taught the difference between girl and woman. I was nineteen and reading *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Alice Walker, in her attempt to define the strength of women of colour, created the term 'womanist'. Womanist is derived from 'womanish'. It is the opposite of 'girlish' – which is defined by Walker as 'frivolous' and 'irresponsible'. Being a womanist means being a woman of colour who uses critical thinking and intersectional feminism to become responsible and in charge of her own equity and justice.

Writing by women, especially by women of colour, is often consumed as girlish in mainstream media, film, television, video games and literature. In 2014, the first VIDA Women of Colour Count showed that structural biases of race and gender within the publication industry resulted in very few women of colour being published, reviewed or read in comparison to White women and men. This is because when women of colour write about ourselves and our communities, in order to take charge of our own narratives, we are criticised by monocultural and patriarchal readers for not having enough imagination.

Sweatshop Women is an anthology which showcases the work of a new writers' collective in Western Sydney that was established in 2018 to exclusively support women from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds. As the coordinator of the writers' collective, I wanted to ensure that members from Aboriginal, African, Arab, Asian, South American and Pasifika backgrounds were empowered to develop their own stories in imaginative and original ways.

In the collective's monthly workshops, each participant was taught the fundamental differences between 'good' and 'bad' writing, the importance of self-representation, and how literature can be used to create alternatives to racist, sexist, homophobic and classist systems of oppression. Our collective was also very fortunate to have a number of established and award-winning women writers of colour attend our workshops. These special guests gave their time, expertise and advice to support the next generation of diverse women. Thank you to Hoa Pham, Julie Koh, Roanna Gonsalves, Shakira Hussein, Sarah Ayoub, Michelle Law, Michelle Cahill, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Maryam Azam, Alison Whittaker and Michelle de Kretser.

While the word 'sweatshop' may conjure up images of marginalised women of colour throughout the world, the word 'woman' in the context of womanism is about being taken seriously as a human being within the intersections of race, class, gender, faith, ability and sexuality. In bringing these two words together, the first volume of Sweatshop Women aims to centre the complex and nuanced experiences of women from

Indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds from Western Sydney and beyond. The voices of women of colour are uplifted against racists, xenophobes, orientalists, colonialists and sexists who occupy our spaces and our stories.

In this publication, the women of Sweatshop reclaim narratives about their identities with prose and poetry. Phoebe Grainer continues Aboriginal sovereignty on country. Christine Afoa speaks to the solidarity between herself and Samoan men, adding a crucial new voice to Pasifika-Australian literature. Joy Adan pushes up against the restraints of being a 'good Filo' girl whilst Diane Wanasawek discusses her dynamic as a 'bad Thai' daughter. Naima Ibrahim and Aisha El-Cheikh reveal the challenges of raising young boys of colour in a White settler colony. Sydnye Allen unpacks the intersectional experience of living as an African-American woman in Australia, and Jessicca Wendy Mensah empowers working-class African-Australian women with rhythm. Annie XY Zhang, Claire Cao and Janette Chen zoom in on the dynamic between Chinese mothers and daughters. Divya Venkataraman and Gayatri Nair seek their mothers' approval as an attempt to understand their Indian heritage, Raveena Grover and Monikka Eliah battle with the cultural and gendered customs surrounding their hair, and Ferdous Bahar writes about the wars Australian Muslim women must fight to wear the hijab. Meyrnah Khodr unravels the close relationship between love and hate as a Lebanese-Australian woman, Rachel Marie brings together and pulls apart her Mauritian-Australian cousins, Shirley Le explores the effects of Chinese colonialism on Vietnamese communities, and Christine Shamista, Natalia Figueroa

Barroso and Lieu-Chi Nguyen haunt us with the ghosts of their ancestors.

To accompany the incredible line-up of writers in Sweatshop Women, there is a powerful visual element to this anthology. Sweatshop is elated to display the creative excellence of Chinese-Australian artist, Rachel Ang, who produced the artwork for our book cover. I have always admired and respected Rachel's unique ability to visually express the intelligence, critical consciousness, beauty and strength of Australia's women of colour. And lastly, Sweatshop is thrilled to showcase each of our writers through a portrait series by Filipino-Australian photographer, Bethany Pal, and Cambodian-Australian graphic designer, Elaine Lim. When women of colour gaze upon one another the lens shifts from fear and hatred to trust and solidarity.

In the context of the global #MeToo movement, which was established in 2006 by African-American civil rights activist Tarana Burke, women are today using their own stories to speak themselves out of abuse, silence and victimisation and into resistance, action and accountability. It is important that women of colour are the focus of the stories we read – we must use our own stories to create radical equity and justice.

Aye sis, here we are: responsible, in charge and serious.

WINNIE DUNN

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# BORAGEE

## PHOEBE GRAINER

*Buna ngkucarnga*. I sip the water from the waterhole I lay in. It tastes of dirt, rock and tree. My back touches the rocks and roots that watch over me. I look at my reflection in *buna*, my brown face burnt from the sun from walking, walking long to reach *yallanya buna*. *Nykoo monga* lays covering *ngmun* and falling into *buna*. *Ngyu nitchingee* iron bark, paper bark watching and waiting in the reflection of *buna*. *Nykoo mula* grabs the roots of the tree. *Yalla*, here in *buna* I will have my child. I scream. There is no one here to hear but *Boogagee*. My *boroo* laying underneath like a stone, heavy and swollen. Soon I will turn this *buna* to blood, blood of *ngyu* and the woman who brought life, *yalla*, *yallanya buna*. I will pull *nykoo* child out of this *buna* and show the sun, *nykoo* child is here like I was born, like the women before me, she is here. I will look down and say, '*Ngyu munka munka nitchingee yondoo*.' She will not be the last.

# THE LONG BOOBED GHOST

## LIEU-CHI NGUYEN

'And that's when I realised I had seen torch ghosts,' my grandma finishes. I remember her voice is crackly like breaking palm sugar. She pops a peeled lychee onto her tongue. Her leathery lips pucker like the mouth of a catfish as she sucks off the cloudy flesh and spits the pip into her hand and throws it into a wooden bowl. Thock.

It is dinner time and everyone else has started eating fruit. Only I am left holding a rice bowl with braised pork. We have had this same dish for the last three days after Grandpa slaughtered a pig for my Great Sixth Aunt's Death Day Anniversary. I stare at the brown salty cubes on the white rice grains and wrinkle my nose. With my small ceramic spoon I scoop rice and bury the meat underneath. I'm sick of pork.

I am the only child sitting on the *bo van nho* with my grandma, my mum and Auntie Thu, around pits of lychees and rambutans.

There are two *bo van* in my family: a smaller one where me and the women sit and a larger one where all the men, like Dad, Grandpa and the uncles sit. Each *bo van* is covered in a *tam chieu*. Both *bo van* are in the lower house where the kitchen is. The upper house is where we sleep and where the family altar is. Most of the houses in Thu Duc before the war have leaf roofs but ours is made of tin because my grandpa thinks tin is more durable. Later, it will protect us from bullets fired by armies. When I look up, I can see the smoke stains from the firewood stove blackening the dull grey metal. When I look down, under the *bo van* is a dirt floor that my mother sweeps every day to stop our bare feet from getting dusty.

Out front is the rice paddy planted near a dirt road, which I was told leads all the way to Saigon. My family's house sits within an orchard of *trai mang cut*, *trai mang cau*, oranges and *quyt*, which I'd help my mother pick when in season. To the back, beyond the orchard, is the family cemetery and behind that are sugar canes and coconut trees.

It is summer and so the large metal doors of the lower house are wide open. Even though it's dark, the air is still sweaty with heat and so only a few kerosene lamps have been lit. Black insects with wings buzz around the lights and the spirits of my grandma's words. This is the time when the men drink *ruou de* and smoke their pipes. This is the time when the women take turns to tell stories.

'Did you ever see the torch ghost again?' asks Auntie Thu, her voice like rustling bamboo.

Auntie Thu is one of the women who works in the rice paddy fields. I see her in the fields wearing her *non la* on her back, hanging off her neck by a purple cotton strap. She always forgets to put it on, which is why she has freckles on her face, unlike my mother's face which is pale and soft. My mother's skin is also clear whereas Auntie Thu's is warty, especially under her chin. The warts remind me of fire anthills made of flesh. I remember my grandma telling me if I wanted my skin to be as *trang* as my mother's I should wash it with rice water. Back then there were no products like Olay.

Auntie Thu is my auntie but not in the way my mother and father's sisters are my *di* and *co*. Auntie Thu works for us and chews betel leaves with my grandma, who is my father's mother. Auntie Thu often has dinner with us because she lost her husband before she could have a baby. For some reason she never wanted to find another husband.

'Nope,' says Grandma, swallowing another lychee. 'But there was that time with the strange rabbit…'

'Oh, I almost forgot,' interrupts Auntie Thu, her eyes wide and bulging as if she had *buou co*. She always gets carried away with stories because she has no one at home to tell them to. 'Old Second Auntie near Cau Bin Loi said her nephew saw the Long Boobed Ghost.'

Sitting with my back against the wall, I stop burying my pork. I set my bowl on the *tam chieu* and look up. I have never heard of that ghost before. I have listened to my grandma's stories

a thousand times. Grandma saw a lot of ghosts before she married my grandpa because she was a farmer's daughter and used to sell vegetables at the market. To do that, she would have to leave her house in the middle of the night. Ghosts only come out in the dark. Maybe my grandma tells so many ghost stories because now she stays inside all day cooking with my mother.

Auntie Thu sees me peering at her and bares her red-stained teeth at me like the pregnant cat I once saw underneath the house. '*Nhi*,' she says. 'If you're *hom* to your mother, or take her for granted by not eating the food she's cooked you, the Long Boobed Ghost will haunt you.'

I glance at my scrambled dinner and shrink sideways against the warmth of my mother, who is darning a pair of cotton pants by the light of the nearest kerosene lamp. Her shiny black hair is tied back from her face in a low chicken's tail. The lamp casts shadows on her high, white cheekbones. Her hands are bony, her fingers slim with skin so thin I can see the blue veins underneath. My mother's hands are unlike Grandma's and Auntie Thu's, which are as tough as chestnut shells. My mother's hands are soft and she is always doing something with them. If she is not mending our clothes, she is embroidering a handkerchief or crocheting fruit or flowers. My mother sighs, 'She has always been such a picky eater.'

'What's the Long Boobed Ghost?' I ask Auntie Thu as I pull my mother's hand from my head and clutch it, my nails digging into her veins.

Auntie Thu's eyes are sharp as metal knitting needles. She bares her teeth again. 'The Long Boobed Ghost is the spirit of an old woman whose breasts are as long as zucchinis and as thick as *trai bi*. Her breasts are so long that if she had a baby on her back, it could reach forward, pull her breast towards it and suckle from her nipple as she floats. If she sees that you have been rotten to your elders she will fly through your window at night and smother you with her bosom.' Auntie Thu leans closer to me until I smell a sickly mix of chewed fruit and stale breath, 'And I can tell you this, she lives in your sugar canes out past the graves.'

My eyes are wide as my skin turns cold even in the sweaty heat of night. I look down at my bowl full of rice and pork. My stomach feels as if there are eels thrashing in it. There is silence then all the women around me laugh.

'Enough stories,' says my mother, although I can see her eyes crinkle at the corners. 'It's time for you to go to bed.'

I hide my pout from my mother and climb off the *bo van nho*. As my feet touch the dirt floor I look out the back window. My neck prickles like there is a rambutan sitting on it. In the distance, I see the outline of the shadowy sugar cane field behind the cemetery. I stand up. My bum is sore and itchy from sitting on the *tam chieu*. Beneath the thin cotton of my cropped pants I can feel the mat's ridges imprinted on my skin.

Later that night, I wake up to the sound of a mosquito. The insect repellent incense must have burnt out. I look around

my room through the mosquito net that is suspended over my bed like a large, soft spider web. I look towards the wall to my left. My window does not have glass like the windows in Australia but is covered in metal bars that curve like an 'S'. These cast shadowy waves that loom like giant stick figures all over my bedroom walls. I swallow. My mouth is dry. My tummy grumbles. I realise I am very hungry. I turn away from the shadows. Maybe if I got up I could find my leftover dinner.

Then, I see that outside my window the moon is almost full and reflects suspended tendrils of silver that look like hair. Beneath those tendrils, I see the face of a woman with eyes glittering like black jade. My breath catches in my throat and I just stare and watch, trying to breathe. On either side of the woman's jowly cheeks, her hands start to grip the windowsill with long, curved nails. Now I know what Auntie Thu was talking about.

The Long Boobed Ghost rises and glides through my window. She is short and completely naked. Her skin is grey and wrinkled and sags like the matted fur of a feral dog. Her breasts, skinny and long as a zucchini but as fat as *trai bi* move closer and closer to my face as she descends. I thrash in bed, pushing up onto my elbows and back against my pillow. I still can't breathe. Then her nipples, which are rough like bitter melon, enter my mouth and cover my nose. I try to take a deep breath to scream but I just suck more of her breast in. Her milk tastes like braised pork buried under rice. And now I'm not so hungry.

Lunch the next day is more pork and rice. I sit on the *bo van nho* with my mother and grandma and Auntie Thu. I dig in my ceramic spoon so I get all of the brown, gelatinous pork and white rice and eat and eat and eat. The saltiness of the pork and the *lac* taste of the rice blend with the sweetness of milk. I keep spooning until I finish eating.

I feel Auntie Thu's knitting needle eyes on me. I turn to her. She looks at me, then my empty bowl, then back at my face. She bares her red teeth and chuckles, 'Did the Long Boobed Ghost whet your appetite?'

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Sweatshop Women is an exciting and contemporary collection of prose and poetry written by women from Indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds. In the first volume of this urgent new series, the diverse women of Western Sydney reclaim their stories of love, faith, home and history.

Featuring: Joy Adan, Christine Afoa, Sydnye Allen, Ferdous Bahar, Claire Cao, Aisha El-Cheikh, Janette Chen, Monikka Eliah, Natalia Figueroa Barroso, Phoebe Grainer, Raveena Grover, Naima Ibrahim, Meyrnah Khodr, Shirley Le, Elaine Lim, Rachel Marie, Jessicca Wendy Mensah, Gayatri Nair, Lieu-Chi Nguyen, Bethany Pal, Christine Shamista, Divya Venkataraman, Diane Wanasawek and Annie XY Zhang. Foreword by Michelle Law.

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