

articles

Vicki Viidikas – On the Road

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Abstract

This article looks back at the life and work of the Australian poet Vicki Viidikas. It argues that she is a powerful feminist voice who did not fit into the stereotypes of what an Australian female poet should be. This article examines the nexus between her bohemian life and her writings in detail. The focus is on the many visits the poet paid to India and the ways her experiences there interacted with her own lifestyle and thoughts. Parallels are drawn between her ways of experiencing life and writing and the ways of the Beat poets.

Keywords: Vicki Viidikas, India, feminism, bohemian, the Beats

บทความคริสตินวิลเลียมส์ ฯลฯ

VickiViidikas-บนถนน

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สะท้อนชีวิตและการทำงานของกวีหญิงชาวออสเตรเลียชื่อ VickiViidikasใน

ฐานะที่เธอเป็นสตรีที่กล้าแสดงความคิดเห็นและไม่อยู่ในกรอบที่กวีหญิงชาวออสเตรเลียควรจะ
เป็น บทความทางวิชาการนี้เป็นบทความครั้งแรกที่ศึกษาการเชื่อมระหว่างชีวิตแบบ
bohemian และงานเขียนของเธออย่างรายละเอียด โดยให้ความสำคัญกับการไปอินเดียและ
ความสัมพันธ์ของประสบการณ์นี้ กับวิถีชีวิตและความคิดของเธอ

คำสำคัญ: Vicki Viidikas อินเดียสตรี โบฮีเมียน

Poet and prose writer, Vicki Viidikas (1948-1998), an emerging and admired figure among her contemporaries in bohemian Sydney in the 1970s and 1980s, gained early attention through her fearless publication. However, she was unwilling or unsuited to turn her talent and vocation into a solid career as a published poet. Given the post-Beat ambience of intellectual freedom and radical questioning of society's mores inherent in her creative writing, she chose to live by this credo rather than submit to the constraints of a mutually self-promoting established literary circle. It might be argued that throughout her roaming life, she retained a touchstone ability to recognise and transgress social barriers and borders, and she reflected this passage, moving through and beyond them, in her writing.

Viidikas showed an exceptional aptitude for conveying visceral and ethereal truths through creative language, and her work has gained renewed appreciation since her death in 1998 and later republication of her work in 2011.

Viidikas's Dionysian lifestyle – a liberated feminist approach to life, including sex, drug-taking and travel, especially in India – was reflected in her works. She 'talked back' to social conservatism that she encountered as an independent woman in both the West and in India. Having been an inveterate traveller on the subcontinent, Viidikas has much to offer in her writing about otherness and borders, drawn from her observations on Indian society. Of a train

trip to a holy city, she wrote, ‘my head sleeps on poems and old vinyl luggage, my legs drawn up away from the west ... it is enough to be here, alive, with the tides of people’. (‘Train Song 2’ 1984)

It might be argued that Viidikas explored in her writing about Indian culture the issue of borders from the perspective of an independent-minded Australian travelling in a South Asian setting, even residing there for short periods. In this paper, we will explore a convergence of life and art in Viidikas’s work, noting some biographical, cross-cultural and performative aspects of her writing to demonstrate how she challenged the boundaries of national, cultural and sexual propriety, and moved beyond socially-determined and hidebound expectations concerning the conduct of self and other. A salient intent observed in Viidikas’s writing was for her to travel abroad as an Australian writer, untrammelled by a need for social acceptance relative to the local population while exploring the effect of difference between cultures on and through her writing. In an interview recorded in 1975 for posterity, Viidikas explains:

My interest in India is a very complicated one. ... In India the emphasis is not on materialism, it is a deeply religious country and I felt as a Westerner that I had more freedom available to me to express myself with writing and with interactions with people ... [de Berg Conversation 6]

Vicki Viidikas was drawn back again and again to India by a sense of spirituality she experienced there – as if, as an outsider given a keyhole to observe another culture at close quarters, she couldn’t resist the witnessing role even as, at times, she became a player in the indigent drama.

On a filmy full moon night the lady is orange through the sky, the streets a menagerie of legs, feet, eyes, flowing one in front of the other, weaving bicycles, pigs, cars, rickshaws, buffalo, goats – the usual Indian scene.

Long wooden trumpets are out for puja in the temple, inside, stone, Parvati, granite cows of enormous size, Shiva, and elephants smiling; the musicians bang drums, PLAY OUT and around deities, and I am inside, a Tamil woman is walking me around the Gods. (1984: 12)

Who can disentangle the spirit from the body? Or public writing from the personal interactions in life that precede it? Or even arts performance distinct from the living that has been its counterpart? Viidikas wrote from an observant eye and an open heart in India:

Every village we passed through was a lesson in impossible work, every farm plot a dream of sufficient bread and vegetables. White oxen ploughed the fields, the tired earth strained her chains. Vultures circled the plains looking for anything, anything. Bells rang on *ghats* as thousands descended to wash. (1984: 10)

This is the spiritual atmosphere in which her senses were immersed – familiar to many Indians while intoxicatingly exotic to an Australian searching for meaning in life, as she wrote in ‘Friday Pooja (Pondicherry)’:

Fire, ash, water, oil – a priest dots ash onto foreheads, he takes offerings of flowers and bananas into the God, and sprinkles them on His head and altar: sings lucidly, chants, while Hindus bob and fiddle with their ears.

Another priest pours water into cupped palms, to be tossed into the mouth; the temple is huge, bronze cobras gleam in carved corners, Shiva is a black hood with silver lines, a lingam piercing the mystery of space; the priest gives out hibiscus, women hook them into their hair as bells ring, drums throb.

Hindu temples are MAGIC and HOLLYWOOD, rituals of COLOUR and MUSIC, the senses overflow, back on the streets Brahmin bulls toss red and green striped horns, jingle bells on wooden yokes – they stroll past, immense white flanks, looking sideways through dark shuttered eyes. (1984: 12)

But these pictures from Viidikas's travels are not mere descriptive fripperies. She writes from her senses, not prepared to idealise a growing appreciation of the sacred in Indian culture at the expense of an often uncomfortable material reality she might experience. For example, she is disgusted by a scene in which she is an active player. As a Western woman, she is provided with clean tank water to drink, while a girl dressed in rags is dependent on the vagaries of life lived beside a dirty open canal. The poem is titled 'Cuttack' from *India Ink*:

They were all worlds apart: the man and the woman, the dog and the goat, east and west, the black canal and clear water tank. All opposites piled up on top of each other, all extremities pumping their struggle out into the heat. ... What Dark One bought weapons instead of food, imported plastics and exported cotton, said the cow was more clean than the girl ...? The Indian Government has warships and a new nuclear reactor; no one instructs the people to keep their waterways clean. (1984: 12, 13)

Viidikas did not recoil from the harsh realities of life, a characteristic evident in her earliest work. Writing about Sydney Harbour on a day that would be 'submerged in a thousand other days', she ends her first ever published poem on a theme of death:

...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. ... his bead eyes had lost their sparkle. ('East Balmain', from *Poetry Australia*, cited in de Berg)

The everyday was Viidikas's clay, whether in Australia or an exotic culture for Australians, India – such as when she questioned a creed that might accept a view that a cow was considered more spiritually clean than a girl living in poverty, in her poem 'Cuttack (Orissa)':

... the woman wants to know who first divided the world into plenty and scarce ... (1984: 13)

as well as from her own familiar culture of Australia where indigenous people might live in squalor while urban pets are pampered:

'... you said when we first met that your job was clipping the nails of poodles,'

contemporary poet, Robert Adamson recalls. (Adamson)

Viidikas never feared living the way the common people of any country lived, nor being 'on the road', just as Ginsberg had felt when he first travelled to India in 1961. He was 35 and driven to find 'the sacred' within everyday living, principally in Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist culture and religion, since he believed the sense and understanding of divinity had generally disappeared from life in the United States. Like many other Westerners who would follow him from the 1960s on, Ginsberg questioned and feared death, taking to the road on a spiritual search for answers, according to biographer, Deborah Baker.

... that is why he spent many hours at the *ghats*, watching the cremations. In whatever he did there was sincerity. ... Allen was ... preoccupied with his own search. *The Rediff Interview* 2008)

As reviewer Louise Waller describes Viidikas, contextualised within a radical Beat-oriented set of artists and writers she mixed with:

Viidikas was a woman who fully engaged with some of the excesses of the late sixties and seventies. The generation of questioning and experimentation, sexual liberation and social consciousness. Experimentation through use of a varied array of mind altering drugs, and spiritual journeys seeking truths outside of the western cultural mainstream. She hooked up with lots of interesting people, lived with and loved a whole lot more, and she took a lot of drugs. (Waller)

Like Ginsberg, perhaps Viidikas wanted an instant answer to the search for meaning in life. So too Ginsberg, who travelled with his lover, Peter Orlovsky, and Beat colleagues, the poets Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger. As biographer Deborah Baker, explains it:

Not content with teachings such as, ‘The only guru is in your own heart,’ he asks the Dalai Lama if drugs can help him reach enlightenment. (Coto)

As Kerry Leves describes Viidikas: ‘Her writing, like her life, strove against the normative. ... Anecdotes surround Vicki Viidikas. None is definitive.’ (Waller)

From Viidikas’s poem ‘Lust’:

Who will bring back the beauty,
the ecstasy, the mystery
of creation?
I, for one, am not
a crackling pig on a spit;
I will not turn the handle
of burning with sin.
I would rather live on flowers,
and a diet of grace.
I may be the last spinster. (Scott 2010: 292)

Post-Beat writers around the world carried forward the realisation that the Beats had in common that there was an emptiness in mainstream culture, and, like the Beats, the post-Beats' choice of an outcast role may retrospectively be considered admirable for the courage that was needed to hold onto a non-materialist vision during a period of rising worship of consumerism.

The spontaneous flow of beat in music, poetry, prose, dance, and other literary/art forms of the post-Beats gave a kind of raw energy to the cultural space of not only the US and Europe, but also to that of Commonwealth nations such as Australia and India, the two countries that were the settings for most of Viidikas's writing. An economic stability that Australia gained post-WW II, through the export of commodities and mass immigration, resulted in a greater general awareness of, and appreciation for, the benefits to the economy and social development of adopting a governmental multiculturalist policy, including regulations and sanctions against social discrimination – fostering a social humanitarianism which by the end of the century would permeate the country's mainstream culture.

It might be argued that the Beat writers' *avant-garde* challenges to the conservatism of the 1940s and '50s played a pivotal part in the great social change that had occurred in Australia by the 1970s when Viidikas and her contemporaries were taking advantage of an anti-censorship freeing-up of artistic expression. Developments such as Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war, as an ally of the invader, the United States, from the mid-1960s on, and the election of a progressive national Labor Government in 1972 – publicly supported by a bevy of writers, actors and artists – were rallying points for writers who wanted to push the boundaries of free speech and action towards egalitarianism.

A nucleus of writers chose a bohemian life, searching for ecstatic experience, often through the use of drugs, and also searching for spiritual truth about the meaning of their lives. Vicki Viidikas, Bill Beard, Jenny Dixon, Kerry Leves, Tim Thorne, Terry Gilmore, Nigel Roberts, Shelton Lea, Robert Adamson and Michael Wilding were some of them - collectively referred to as the 'Generation of '68'. They tried to liberate their bodies and minds, through alternative means, to free themselves from the shackles of institutional over-regulation, whether governmental, academic, sexual or religious. As Wilding writes on the first page of his recent memoir of the publishing house he co-founded in the 1970s, *Wild & Woolley*:

I met Pat Woolley at a performance event ... one of those performances where the performers took off their upper garments and exchanged them with each other, so there were bare breasts along with chanting and singing, which in 1973 was considered the height of the avant-garde.

In his memoir, Wilding, who acknowledges the Beats as a major influence on his own writing, recalls when he first saw the Beat poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti striding down the streets of San Francisco.

And what was he doing? Declaiming one of his poems? Composing one? Signing autographs? No, he was carrying boxes of books into the City Lights warehouse. It cheered me up in the years ahead as I shifted boxes of books from shelf to shelf back in Australia. The literary life, with all its heavy lifting. (44-45)

The literary life, for poets such as Viidikas too, was not all fun and games, but an experience of coming hard up against the reality of making a living and most people's lack of any interest in poetry, let alone buying her poetry in book form.

Wilding describes Viidikas as 'one of the most brilliant talents of the reawakened Australian literary scene of the late 1960s and '70s'.

She blazed through the inner-city worlds of Balmain and East Sydney, and the alternative settlements of the NSW coast, with an unforgettable intensity. She wrote directly from experience and her whole life was a commitment to seeking out experience, to capturing the authentic. Her stories and poems embodied the mood of that heady moment of creativity, and gave expression in a unique and direct idiom to what so many of her contemporaries felt. 'Her writing is strong and honest, and she needs no tricks or games,' wrote Anne Summers. (Wilding 2011 p 13)

Wilding also writes of Robert Adamson – as one of the few poets to do well from among those he published. (56) Adamson first came to prominence as a poet in the 1960s when, along with John Tranter and Michael Dransfield, he was a key figure in initiating this so-called Generation of '68 ... recently described as a group of 'poets committed to experimentation, to making poetry new'. (ASA 2011)

Through the 1960s, Robert Adamson continued to traverse new poetic ground, prominent and active right through until the present, winning among other awards, the Patrick White Award this year and also honoured as the first Chair of Australian Poetry at the University of Technology, Sydney, in 2011. His contemporary, Vicki Viidikas, also defied outdated forms of writing, but she died at the age of 50 in 1998, having suffered some of the scourges of a drug culture and a reasonably poor material life. She stayed true to her values, close to the people of the earth, rather than to the values of others who might aspire to a revered life of one kind or another, ambitious for fame or fortune. As a member of that Generation of '68 she feared she could not finally escape even its dominant conservative sexism, as she described in the poem 'They Always

Come' from her collection, *Condition Red*, about a woman found alone in a room after her death:

They'll see
charleston dresses of the mind
with their fringes running like blood,
a list of men's names
from childhood to eternity,
they'll dig the very fluff from the floorboards
examine the stains on the manuscripts. (Scott interview: 2)

Australia's great novelist, Christina Stead, certainly recognized Viidikas's brilliance. 'As for V.V.,' Stead wrote to Michael Wilding, 'her portraits of men instant and sharp, could only have been done by a girl who took those chances (and had talent). She has tremendous talent.' (Wilding 75)

With scant academic grounding in contemporary literary theory, Viidikas wrote as if she understood through instinct, the knowledge that Foucault was discovering in peeling back layer upon layer of established social power relations, 'the phenomenon of the social body [as] the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals'. (1980: 55)

Vicki Viidikas's fascination with Asian cultures, particularly those in the Indian sub-continent, can be argued as having been a form of 'problemitization', before the literary/philosophical terminology was generally accepted or understood. In an interview in 1988, Foucault described the 'problematization of a present' as 'the questioning by the philosopher of this present to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to situate himself'. (1988: 88)

Growing up in Australia with one of her parents Estonian, Viidikas's cultural viewpoint was skewed away from the mainstream,

giving her a unique perspective for reflection and challenge of the authoritarianism – the social borders and barriers – of both Australia and other cultures. As an adult, her interest in contrasting Indian culture and Hinduism with accepted Australian values was reflected in her writings, especially in *India Ink*. Even earlier, the opposition she sees between Indian and Western cultures in her short story 'The Silk Trousers', which appeared in her anthology titled *Wrappings*, is worth mentioning:

The man retained a power from thousands of years of spiritual birthright – he had tiger and elephant Gods to advise him, and she had culturally nothing. A twisted image of a Son of God impaled on a wooden cross, a pale corpse who made her a sinner before she was even born. Two thousand years of guilt to absolve - no time for dancing or feasting or love-making. (121)

The Beat Generation was a manifestation of not only political but cultural aspects of society studied under a microscope of mind-expanding experimentation. During the '60s, there was an intellectual call for the rawness of human 'being' to break the walls of a hypocritical society. Writers such as Vicki Viidikas do not confine themselves to literature, but, as Gregory Corso puts it, their writing was 'about everything' (Weinreich 72).

She [Vicki] was aggressively non partisan, an individual who freely functioned beyond any political agenda. Her life was one of direct action and reaction - and as governable as that. (Oliver 3)

Viidikas's actions, both public and private, can be identified as a kind of performance, capable of challenging the traditional forms and conventions of literature and stage. In her poem '9 of hearts', Viidikas writes:

I'm running
I'm going
To catch the midnight train
And sit behind drawn blinds
With gamblers in dark waistcoats
I'm going to play fast poker. (1973: 1)

Here, the poet is narrating her actions or, rather, her experience of a night. When an experience is written in words or expressed as poetry, it becomes a verbal performance of an actual, virtual or imaginative performance, implicitly affecting the human psyche during the time of its creative practice. Both actual and virtual performance cannot be confined to the experience of a poet alone, but also includes external influences, such as audience or readership, time, space, even the influences of a generation. Actual, virtual and verbal performances in the works of Vicki Viidikas may be seen to merge to some extent. She writes images, as she writes philosophy, as she herself inhabits the spatial image:

Remember the long train rides, call of a shrill steam whistle on a trip for three days? Carriages engorging tons of Indians, dysentery-ridden westerners, and ganni sacks of grain and potatoes. Every step was a lesson in patience and endurance. ... Nothing could stop the desire for life, nothing hold back the urge to mate, shelter, extend ... So how many rides would it take to answer a simple question[sic?] How exist with so little yet still have laughter around the hearth? Freedom at midnight. We *feringees* [foreigners] had never produced enough soul food. (1984: 10)

How people behave and how they display their behaviour is fundamental to culture as well as performance. Erving Goffman says that 'we all act better than we know how' while explaining how everyday life becomes or 'happens' as a performance (73). A major

difference between performance in day-to-day life and on the stage is that in the latter there is more awareness of the action and its consequences than in the former. Both use body and space; one according to the rehearsal for the stage performance and the other according to the 'rehearsal' one gets from one's own culture. It is the space which in part determines the nature of the performance. According to Richard Schechner, the space of the performance is important because the space and the circumstances determine whether the performance is an entertainment or efficiency. Schechner adds that "no performance is pure efficiency or pure entertainment" (130) as it is a part of a broader space – as culture and ritual. Jean Lyotard, in his book *Post modern condition: A report in knowledge* calls performance 'efficiency' in this respect. No action falls outside the boundaries of performance, and so everyday life becomes a performance. The Beat life and actions in this respect can be identified as a performative discourse between cultures and ideologies.

An analysis of the writings of Vicki Viidikas with respect to her actions/performances in different contexts and cultural spaces reveals this connectedly-discoursed aspect of her performative writing. It might be argued that Viidikas created, yet at the same time unsettled, subjectivity about performance, according to the Foucauldian idea of 'the body as the object and target of power' in relation to its obedience and utility as a subject (1995: 136). Viidikas might be said to have played with settled expectations of 'an art of the human body' (1995: 137), aimed at a demystification of the so-called elitist status of art that had so far prevailed during the Modernist era.

What I was writing was really confessional, it was just – I'd go out to a party or something and if anything upset me or I was depressed, I'd go home and scribble things down on bits of

paper, really just what my inner feelings were at the time (de Berg Conversation 3)

In a way, Viidikas was writing her self, as sensed, onto the page. This self was later made public as art. Wilding describes her voice as ‘always recognizable, always effortless’, like the jazz singers she admired, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday.

She aimed for spontaneity. ‘Trying to catch the voice’, she called one piece. To call her a stylist is misleading – or so she would no doubt have thought. Her whole project was to be free of affectation, of manner, of precedent. But her clarity, her directness, her visionary evocations and surreal connections have the characteristic note of an assured, spare, vividly colourful modernism. You do not achieve spontaneity like Vicki’s without years of commitment. (Wilding 14)

Wilding certainly admired Viidikas’s body of work. He says she ‘remained true to her art, refused to compromise, continued to write, but except for rare appearances in magazines and anthologies, effectively ceased to publish’.

It is a tragedy and a scandal that so comparatively small a part of her work appeared in print. She travelled widely – in India, her especial love, in the Middle East and Europe. She remained adamant in her refusal of the comfortable and the conventional. ... In that time-honoured tradition of the avant-garde artist, she preferred bohemia to bourgeois existence, and she preferred the *demi-monde* to bohemia. ... In her last years she became a myth, lost to the view of the literary world that she had inspired, stimulated, informed and reviled. (Wilding: 16)

In effect Viidikas tried as much as possible to challenge the bourgeois in society, and the many social barriers that are entrenched in the self-interest of individuals or groups, all political in their own

ways – nationalist, statist, gendered, racial, ageist – separating those with cachet and those without.

All such borders must be negotiated along and across one's own life and work. In exposure to the cant and hypocrisy embedded in others' self-interest, it's valuable to recognise the borders of protection of one's own self-image. Viidikas was prepared to go further than most creative writers in exposure of her post-Beat humanist self rather than hide behind walled façades or masks of self-importance – such as an extensive published body of work – and using justifying language about her life and art.

In Viidikas's own words, in the poem 'Listening Backwards' published in 1978:

Where have the readings led us? Into definitions
structures ... the last pillars of sound ... solidified, scarred ...
We meet again and agree these structures will poison
us. (Waller: 5)

In a fiery, didactic way, Viidikas's body of work is a reflection of womanhood expressed, bursting out from womanhood repressed by social barriers.

His wife sits silent, never introduced, her solemn face nurses the
baby, the food bundles, the commitment to marriage ... (Sallay: 9)

Viidikas herself had a larger vision, beyond the structures which we habitually accept and which induce in most of us a fear of the unknown. It was a vision which strove to understand no less than the immensity of the goddess Kali, her blackness and power, and to present that understanding through her writing:

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. (1984: 59)

And finally, another of Viidikas's Indian poems, 'Mamallapuram (Tamil Nadu)' offers us some hope in the face of the inevitable arising of borders between people who are acculturated diversely different, as the universe turns through time:

The ancient calendar revolves its
 execution – there's no moment too small for the birth of
 another dream. (1984: 51)

Time enough to recognise Viidikas – through her writing and performance of her poetry and prose, linked inextricably with the performance of her life – as a valuable contributor to the vitality and strength of the post-Beat influence on the 1970s and 1980s Australian literary scene.

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