

# ‘AS IF MY BONES HAD BEEN CHANGED INTO CLOUDS’: QUEER EPIPHANIES IN DAVID MALOUF’S FICTION

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From his first novel *Johnno* (1975) to his most recent *Ransom* (2009), David Malouf’s fiction has consistently explored same-sex desire between men in a range of complex configurations that capture the multifacetedness and often contradictory nature of such non-normative erotic feelings and experiences. The important place homoerotic desire plays in Malouf’s *oeuvre* has been the subject of a growing body of scholarship from Stephen Kirby’s groundbreaking 1987 article in *Meanjin* which employed Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential theories of male homosocial desire, to Ivor Indyk’s 1993 monograph, Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert’s 1994 reading of the play *Blood Relations* and more recently Stephen Abblitt’s 2008 take on queer spaces in Malouf’s autobiographical fictions and Michael Farrell’s 2009 examination of Malouf’s queer poetics. I want to build on the critical insights of this scholarship by directing attention to Malouf’s use of queer epiphanies.

Dale and Gilbert argue that the tendency of some critics to read ‘over the erotic, not to mention the homoerotic’ in Malouf’s work is at least partly enabled by the ‘ambiguities’ of his writing (91). One way this ambiguity is achieved is through Malouf’s use of epiphanies. It can be argued that Malouf’s writing has employed epiphanies to the point where such moments of heightened sensation, personal enlightenment or deep realisation and wonderment have become a defining Joycean hallmark of his fiction. Focusing on Malouf’s first novel *Johnno* and two examples of his short fiction—‘Southern Skies’ (1985) and ‘Closer’ (2000)—this paper critically examines his use of epiphanies from a queer theoretical framework. As Nikki Sullivan argues, queer theories aim ‘to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up – heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them’ (vi). Or put more simply by Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird, queer theories attempt to ‘undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries’ (4). By employing a queer epistemology to reread Malouf’s fiction we can develop a more nuanced approach that avoids reductive readings that limit his writing to a repressed form of gay fiction, or alternatively, readings that ignore and evade the way same-sex desire circulates and is articulated in Malouf’s *oeuvre*.

In Ivor Indyk’s extended reading of Malouf’s representation of same-sex desire he finds homoeroticism positioned as apolitical, as placed outside of time and history in a kind of pre-discursive and primitive state ‘surfacing only as an unexplained intrusion, a coded trace, an enigmatic attraction denied as soon as it is asserted’ (90). Following Indyk’s approach, Malouf’s fiction with its abundant examples of epiphanic moments of same-sex desire between men can be viewed as concurrently articulating and disarticulating homoeroticism and possible homosexual identities and relationships. This double movement is particularly prevalent in some of Malouf’s novels, notably *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *Fly Away Peter* (1982), *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984), *The Great World* (1990) and short fiction such as ‘Night Training’ (1987). For example in *Fly Away Peter*, the pre-World War I relationship between Ashley Crowther and Jim Saddler is envisaged, as Indyk has astutely observed, as an erotic communion between men in nature (90). The numinous quality of their same-sex desire is

captured in Ashley's epiphanic flight of ideas which are contained in one momentous sentence:

What he could not know was to how great a degree these trips into the swamp, in something very like a punt, were for Ashley recreations of long, still afternoons on the Cam, but translated here not only to another hemisphere, but back, far back, into some pre-classical, pre-historic, primaeval and haunted world (it was this that accounted for his mood of suspended wonder) in which the birds Jim pointed out, and might almost have been calling up as he named them in a whisper out of the mists before creation, were extravagantly disguised spirits of another order of existence, and the trip itself—despite the picnic hamper and the champagne bottles laid in ice, and the girls, one of whom was the girl he was about to marry—a water journey in another, deeper sense; which is why he occasionally shivered, and might, looking back, have seen Jim, where he leaned on the pole, straining, a slight crease in his brow and his teeth biting into his lower lip, as the ordinary embodiment of a figure already glimpsed in childhood and given a name in mythology, and only now made real. (30-31)

In Ashley's epiphany—'his mood of suspended wonder'—the same-sex desire he feels towards Jim is understood via a primitivist discourse that locates such homoerotic feelings in 'some pre-classical, pre-historic, primeval and haunted world.' A major effect created by this positioning of homoerotic desire as both present/absent and real/mythological in Malouf's writing is a strategic dis/articulation of same-sex desire between men (Barlow).

The works I examine in more detail below present a different type of manoeuvre; instead of cloaking same-sex desire in 'the mists before creation' these epiphanies are created directly, not covertly, by the experience of homosexual desires and/or identities. Furthermore, these epiphanies differ in the way they offer a queer reading that encourages and gestures towards a radical sexual openness. José Esteban Muñoz's thinking on 'queer futurity' is useful here. Muñoz argues that 'queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (1). Taking on the tone of a manifesto Muñoz states:

The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. (1)

In the words of Elisavet Pakis, Muñoz's idea of queer futurity, which builds on Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'potentiality,' Ernst Bloch's Marxist utopianism and Husserl's 'horizon of being,' opens up queerness 'as a horizon of potentiality, a not yet here, which however gives us an anticipatory illusion of another horizon of possibility' (Pakis, 2). Following Muñoz's logic, I want to read Malouf's queer epiphanies as performing a valuable function in creating queerness as futurity, as a 'not yet here' space, from which horizons of potentiality emerge. Unlike Ashley's homoerotic epiphany in *Fly Away Peter* which locates same-sex desire as in the past to the point of being 'pre-historic,' Malouf's queer epiphanies are

different in that they look towards a future full of alternative possibilities, a queer envisioning of a then and there.

### **Johnno: ‘my mind whirled’**

Arguably, the most commonly quoted queer epiphany in Malouf’s fiction is the rather remarkable moment of self-realisation that occurs towards the end of his first novel *Johnno* when the narrator Dante openly acknowledges ‘possibilities I could never myself have imagined.’ Dante elaborates:

I thought disquietingly of moments when the whole course of events as they stood between us quivered expectantly, and might have gone another way: an afternoon whose heat now returned so powerfully to my imagination that sweat started out all over my skin. . . . Remembering how all afternoon the occasion had refused to declare itself. . . . And years later, in Athens, when I was struggling to get him home one night and we had come to rest for a moment in a dirty shopfront, his whole drunken weight against me, he had laughed suddenly, his mouth close to my ear, and said: ‘You know Dante, when we were at school, I used to think of you as the most *exotic* creature—so strange and untouchable.’ . . . My mind had whirled, a whole past turning itself upside down, inside out, to reveal possibilities I could never myself have imagined. (153-54)

Dante’s epiphany is coupled a page later with Johnno’s last letter which includes the revelatory line ‘I’ve loved you’ (154). As Dante explains, ‘Its tone was that of every letter or postcard I had ever received from him’ (153). Dante’s selective and unreliable retrospective narration withholds such life-changing information to the end of his narrative which in turn begs a reassessment of the novel. Dante’s epiphany can be read as a moment of ‘coming out’: that trope of gay identity formation which can have both liberating and devastating consequences. Or as both Indyk and Kirby have argued, the novel reveals itself at this moment as a ‘homosexual romance’ (Indyk 7). It is worth noting at this point, that Malouf himself in his 1998 preface to the novel objected to reading *Johnno* ‘as a gay novel in disguise’ (xiv). Rather than declare in true Roland Barthes style the death of the author here, I take Malouf’s comments at face value, as the novel does not disguise its homoerotic content but is instead forthright about it. Don Randall’s monograph on Malouf makes a similar claim: ‘internal evidence shows that homosexual desire has an avowed place within the text’ (32). For example, in addition to Dante’s epiphany and Johnno’s last letter, Dante acknowledges that ‘several times I thought I was in love – once, not so briefly, with a boy from Sarina’ (109). When Johnno suggests Dante earns some money as a ‘male tart’ in Sweden, Dante objects not to the prospect of sex with men, but rather to the idea of sex work (121). When Dante proposes instead that Johnno launches himself as a ‘male tart’ in Spain, he replies that the Spanish lack money (121). Johnno also informs Dante that ‘two queers had offered to take him to Hong Kong. When pressed for details Johnno shrugged, looked inscrutable, then gave one of his big, open grins’ (55). Early in the novel Dante recounts Johnno’s homoerotic experiences at Cadet Camp where he ‘organizes “sessions” in the showers at which he wins over three pounds by being able to come faster and further and more often than any other boy in his platoon’ (15). These are not moments of coded or covert homoeroticism, but explicit declarations and examples of same-sex desire, love and experiences.

Instead of solidifying sexual identity, Dante’s epiphany finds his memories, desires and sense of self ‘turning upside down, inside out.’ This unsettling notion of movement and flux

expressed and experienced by Dante—‘my mind had whirled’—points to a radical queer openness to things rather than a coming out into a fixed and restrictive gay identity complete with its own policing of desire. For Dante, Johnno posed an exciting and alluring challenge to normative epistemologies: ‘His wildness . . . had come to seem a marvellously liberating alternative to my own wishy-washy and hypocritical niceness’ (48). Reading *Johnno* as a queer novel instead of ‘a gay novel in disguise’ avoids reducing Dante’s life-changing epiphany about his friend to a singularity; instead we can perhaps adopt one of Johnno’s rather ambiguous ‘big open grins’ (55). Or as Dante questions at the end of the penultimate chapter: ‘How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things, is a man’s life as we know it intended to violate?’ (165). Dante’s epiphany of ‘possibilities I could never myself have imagined,’ the idea of a different—‘even sexual’—relationship with the now dead Johnno, becomes by the end of the novel queer ‘possibilities’ or ‘alternative fates’ that are at least imaginable and avowed. In revisiting his own past and recreating Johnno’s short exuberant life—‘he was always one jump ahead’ (11)—Dante’s narration creates a space that enables the possibility of a queer future not prescribed by the strictures of heteronormativity.

### **Southern Skies: ‘my bursting into the life of things’**

If one of the professed aims of queer theories is to challenge and disrupt the binary thinking of heteronormativity—the either/or, homo/hetero logic that is so prevalent and naturalised in our culture—a good place to start is third spaces where a strategic blurring and locating of experiences, desires and identities as in-between occurs. Seemingly, a key trope that threads through the story ‘Southern Skies’ from the collection *Antipodes* is such a notion of in-betweenness. There is the contrast between the ‘Old Country’ of Europe, and specifically Czechoslovakia, and the bright and humid new world of the antipodes, in this case Brisbane. Within this migrant-Australian space the Professor has created a house which harks back to his European roots but is surrounded by native plants. The unnamed narrator who is caught between childhood and adulthood describes himself as a cyborgian ‘centaur’ (12), as a ‘half-boy, half-bike, half aimless energy and half a machine that could hurtle off at a moment’s notice in any one of a hundred directions’ (13). This in-betweenness finds the teenaged narrator caught between the potential seduction of Mary (a woman the age of his mother) and the actual seduction of the Professor (the good friend of his father). These liminal positions seem to create for the narrator a moment of stasis as he ‘simply hung motionless in the saddle, balanced and waiting’ (13). The boy wants the future to come, but does not want to be bounded by experience: ‘I didn’t want to discover the limits of the world’ (13).

This emotional and psychological impasse creates a constellation of unspoken desires that comes to an epiphanic queer climax when he discovers the southern stars and the Professor’s wandering masturbatory hand while looking through the telescope. The narrator recalls:

Slowly, from so far out, I drew back, re-entered the present and was aware again of the close suburban dark—of its moving now in the shape of a hand. I must have known all along that it was there, working from the small of my back to my belly, up the inside my thigh, but it was of no importance, I was too far off. . . .

I must have come immediately. But when the stars blurred in my eyes it was with tears, and it was the welling of this deeper salt, filling my eyes and rolling down my cheeks, that was the real overflow of the occasion. . . .

We stood on opposite sides of the occasion. Nothing of what he had done could make the slightest difference to me, I was untouched: youth is too physical to accord very much to that side of things. But what I had *seen*—what he had led me to see—my bursting into the life of things—I would look back on that as the real beginning of my existence, as the entry into a vocation, and nothing could diminish the gratitude I felt for it. (24-25)

The ecstatic moment the boy experiences through the telescope—his ‘bursting into the life of things’—becomes inseparable from his concurrent sexual experience. The homosexual act becomes an intrinsic part of his epiphany that is ingrained in his memories as much as the revelatory moment of looking at the majestic southern sky. The sexual imagery mobilised in the narrator’s epiphany builds on the earlier image of the stars as a ‘frozen waterfall’ (22) which is dramatically thawed by the vision he witnesses through the telescope and by the sexual act he experiences leading to a combining of both vision and act though the use of words like ‘overflow,’ ‘bursting’ and ‘tears’. However, the aftermath of this epiphany is a complex mixture of insight, gratitude and confusion for the teenager. The repeated euphemistic use of ‘the occasion’ to describe his entry into a sexual and stellar knowledge via the Professor’s telescope and hand, echoes Dante’s use of ‘the occasion’ to describe his epiphanic memory of Johnno. Similarly, the boy’s ‘passive expectancy’ (22) at approaching the Professor’s house ‘and the nights quivering with expectancy’ (12), is paralleled in Dante’s description of how his relationship with Johnno ‘quivered expectantly.’ This sense of anticipation captures the unspoken desire that circulates throughout these two texts and especially the way the desire of the respective narrators is figured as something not quite grasped, as unformulated, unfixed and unfolding.

Despite the narrator’s insistence that the sexual incident has left him ‘untouched,’ his insistence on this, plus his language and ‘unsteady’ body movements, betrays how deeply ‘the occasion’ has affected him. At the end of the story we find the narrator riddled by ‘misapprehension’ which becomes ‘a weight I would have to bear. Carrying it with me, a heavy counterpoise to the extraordinary lightness that was my whole life, I bounced unsteadily over the dark tufts of the driveway and out onto the road’ (25). For the boy there has been an inextricable change in his outlook on life as he is marked, for better or worse, by his initiation into new ways of seeing, knowing and being.

In ‘Southern Skies’ a reoccurring trope is the homoerotic gaze: the pleasure of being looked at and looking. Traditionally the gaze sets up a binary of subject/object, but in Malouf’s formulation in this story, the object is endowed with a degree of power and subjectivity. When the narrator recalls the Professor gazing at him playing football, the boy feels pleasure at being watched with his ‘reckless passion to be admired’ (11) and ‘the warm sense of myself it gave me to command his attention’ (11). Additionally, the narrator revels in the voyeuristic antics of the Professor spying on him as a half-bike half-boy through his phallic telescope:

On other occasions, pedalling past his house among the trees, I would catch a glimpse of him with his telescope on the roof. He might raise a hand and wave if he recognised me; and sprinting away, crouched low over the handlebars, I would feel, or imagine I felt, that the telescope had been lowered and was following me. . . . (12)

The boy also looks at the Professor. We not only get descriptions of him as an eccentric old man, but also as a young man when the boy examines the photograph of the Professor in

military uniform. This looking into the Professor's past is cut short by him stating: 'We should live for the present. Or like you younger people . . . for the future' (17). Homoerotic gazes become preludes to homosexual touching and are fused with the acquiring of new knowledge and experiences, or to re-quote Dante: 'possibilities I could never myself have imagined.' This mutual gazing, and more generally the trope of looking, reaches its climax with the epiphanic sexual incident that occurs while watching the southern skies, which queerly links new ocular experiences with new sexual potentialities.

Another defining trope of this story is the notion of infinity. For example, in explaining the drama of the night sky to the boy, the Professor explains how the stars are 'beautiful, since they unfold, you know, to a kind of music, to numbers of infinite dimension like the ones you deal with in equations at school, but more complex, and entirely visible' (18). The narrator's desire not to be limited by life finds him unconsciously reproducing two common symbols for infinity when he rides his bicycle around in 'slow circles or figures-of-eight' (13). I would argue that for the narrator, heterosexual sex is constructed as numbered, limited and circumscribed, as evidenced in his recollection of his girlfriend Helen: 'For fear of losing me she might have gone to any one of the numbers that in those days marked the stages of sexual progress. . . . I could have taken us both to 6, 8, 10, but what then? The numbers were not infinite' (13).

For the narrator infinity is revealed as possible and visualised in the stars, which in turn awakens him not simply to a vast array of future possibilities but also non-normative sexual possibilities. Heteronormativity with its imposition of binary sexual roles, positions and identities is presented as a closed, linear and contained option as the narrator refuses the advances of his girlfriend Helen and the seductive manoeuvres of the mature Mary. Non-normative sexualities enabled by the Professor's hand present queer possibilities outside the norm, ushering in the potentiality for infinite configurations of desire not limited to a prescribed opposite gender. The plural use of sky in the story's title highlights not just the literal sky of southern stars seen through the telescope, but also an epiphanic understanding of a multitude of new horizons, futures and experiences: a grasping and comprehension of the infinite possibilities, sexual and otherwise, looming into the narrator's consciousness via the Professor's unorthodox night-time tutelage. In this light, we can read Malouf's use of infinity as a queer concept, especially if we mobilise Muñoz's definition of queerness as 'the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing' (1). The teenage narrator of 'Southern Skies' exhibits a profound acknowledgement that 'indeed something is missing' and desires a life and way of being that is different from the present, the here and now. Instead, the boy attempts to visualise a then and there, as he sees a queer future epiphanically glimpsed in the infinite southern stars.

### **Closer: 'as if my bones had been changed into clouds'**

Malouf's exploration of sexuality in 'Closer' from the collection *Dream Stuff* is astutely decentred through the eyes of Amy, a nine-year-old Pentecostal girl, and her relationship with her outcast gay Uncle Charles whose 'coming out' to his family three years ago has led to a literal banishment and exile. The poignancy of the story is created by its matter-of-fact narrator Amy, who has the telling ability to cut through the limited binary thinking of the adult world around her. There is no ambiguity here about homosexuality as a subject, and Malouf deftly captures the distraught emotions of the adults through the perceptions of a young girl. Amy's grandmother silently mourns her son's absence, setting a place at the Easter and Christmas dinner table for her firstborn, which in turn creates an uncanny absent

presence that haunts this upright religious family. In a different vein, Amy's grandfather, despite his decree of banishment, 'likes to see that he is still okay' (28) from the safe distance of the fence. Amy's mother recalls: 'Charlie's just a big kid. He never grew up. He was always such fun to be with' (29). Uncle Charles' desire for a reunion with or acceptance by his family is demonstrated by his repeated visits to the farm even though he gets no further than the home-paddock fence.

As the family rift continues to widen, Amy starts to challenge the epistemologies of the Pentecostal faith, finding contradictions and suffering where once there was laughter and unconditional love. She elaborates:

But I don't understand about love anymore than I do about death. It seems harder than anyone can bear to stand on one side of the fence and have Uncle Charles stand there on the other. As if he was already dead, and death was stronger than love, which surely cannot be. (30)

Amy's bluntness provides a valuable critique of the normative. The binary of love/death are linked and collapsed: their respective Pentecostal meanings have become meaningless to Amy, or at the very least challenged and open to other interpretations. Caught between a certain Pentecostal epistemology and her own emerging understanding of things, Amy begins to read the situation in a double frame: Uncle Charles' car is figured as the 'chariot of death' (31) but also described by Amy more positively as like a 'spaceship' (28). In a similar fashion, Uncle Charles is associated not only with the angel of death, but also as a golden and heavenly angel with no visible marks of his transgression and sin. Amy questions the Pentecostal fire and brimstone logic that surrounds her with the actual evidence that she sees. The Pentecostal imagery of fire and burning is infused in Amy's thinking, and we get a possible allusion to the spectre of HIV/AIDS in the reference to Uncle Charles' body—which despite his visible signs of good health—is supposedly infected and marked: 'The corruption is invisible. The fire is under his clothes and inside him, hidden beneath the tan' (28).

Despite the threat of 'infection' Amy faces at any contact with her Sodom-dwelling Uncle Charles, she desires to be closer to him and in the process, to heal the rift in her family. Amy also aligns herself with her outcast Uncle, especially through her use of space travel metaphors and similes. In addition to his silver BMW being described as an enchanting 'spaceship' and 'like a spaceship homing in' (27) Amy also views her uncle's voice as like a 'spaceman's' (27). Although such metaphoric linkages of Uncle Charles and his homosexuality can reinforce notions of his outsider or alien status, it is tempered by the humorous logic of Amy's blunt observation that: 'Sodom is far off, but one of the stations on the line is at the bottom of our hill and many trains go back and forth' (27). Moreover, the spaceship/spaceman imagery is coded as positive by Amy as she explains: 'when I grow up I mean to be an astronaut' (27). There is a crucial link here between Amy and her uncle, a desire to leave the dairy farm and seek new horizons, new spaces and the infinite. Like the narrator of 'Southern Skies,' Amy desires a world where possibilities exist, not preordained outcomes and predestined futures. Her desire to be 'closer' to her uncle gets figured as a queer desire that has the potential to fashion other ways of being, alternative imaginaries and a future not hindered by the normative.

Amy's epiphanic dream about Uncle Charles coincides with the end of his fruitless visits when his absence takes a more permanent form. Amy's dream challenges the heteronormative binary logic of her Pentecostal upbringing by deconstructing or dismantling the literal fence

marking the home-paddock which demarcates the saved from the fallen, believers from sinners: ‘What I thought, in the dream, was that the lumpy coarse-stemmed grass was the same on both sides, so why not? If one thick blade didn’t know any more than another that the fence was there, why should his feet?’ (31).

Amy’s logic here echoes the way the farm dogs too view the fence as unimportant, greeting Charles with their rapturous tongues (28). In Amy’s cherished dream the ‘tough grass had been changed into flowers’ (32) and ‘all around his feet, little daisies and gaudy, bright pink clover flowers began to appear, and the petals glowed liked metal, molten in the sun but cool, and spread uphill to where we were standing’ (31). Amy’s epiphany creates such a ‘feeling of lightness and happiness it was if my bones had been changed into clouds’ (32). Such a desire for the transformation and melding of the binaries of hot and cold, hard and soft, homo and hetero is an optimistic vision that perhaps can only occur in some queer future moment when Amy becomes an astronaut and joins her uncle in his spaceship to tour an endless array of potentialities in the infinite outer reaches of space. Moreover, what Malouf’s story beautifully captures is a queer utopian trope which gestures towards a queer futurity. As Muñoz elaborates ‘Queerness’s form is utopian. Ultimately we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent (30). Amy’s fire-and-brimstone Pentecostal present is dissolved and diluted by her utopian longings to cross boundaries, to dare to imagine different types of futures and her epiphanic dreaming to be closer to her ‘alien’ gay Uncle Charles.

These queer epiphanies in Malouf’s writing create moments not simply of enlightenment or self-realisation, but can also be read as framed and concerned with various versions of non-normative sexual enlightenment and imagining the possibility of new horizons, a queer futurity. From Dante’s revelatory memories of Johnno, to the boy’s stellar sexual initiation by the Professor’s hand and telescope and Amy’s poignant desire to heal the rift between her gay uncle and her family, Malouf’s queer epiphanies posit a different type of epistemology or way of seeing and experiencing life that is not limited by binaries and either/or options. Instead, these queer epiphanies in Malouf’s fiction can be read as arguing for and desiring a radical openness, a potentiality which is constantly deferred, unlimited and unhindered: a type of queer futurity that reaches towards and as far as infinity.

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