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Unweaving the Contemporary: A Review of Nancy Gaffield's *Continental Drift* (Shearsman, 2014) ISBN 978-1-84861-329-4 and Sandeep Parmar's *Eidolon* (Shearsman, 2015) ISBN 978-84861-392-8

In an interview with Olivia Tatum, Sandeep Parmar explained that her 'sense of self-exile, of inheriting exile as an internal condition' had become a key poetic anxiety. Her latest collection, *Eidolon*, takes this condition as a central aesthetic stimulus, as Parmar re-casts Helen of Troy, the ultimate female outcast, in a twenty-first century context. This book follows her debut collection, *The Marble Orchard*, also published by Shearsman in 2012. Since then Parmar has been heralded as 'one of the most exciting emerging voices in British poetry' (Dominic Smith, Dundee Review). She is a scholarly poet, recognised for her academic achievements in publishing Hope Mirlees and Mina Loy, but in *Eidolon* Parmar turns her attention to Greek myth, and more specifically to the cultural chasm between antiquity and the contemporary. The work is on one level highly conceptual. Expanding on the Greek term 'Eidolon', meaning both an idealisation and a phantom, Parmar utilises the literary archive (namely Whitman's *Eidolons*, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, and Euripides' tragedies) to transpose and expose Helen to the incongruity of present day California. The collection presents Helen in mundane episodic encounters: Helen buying groceries, Helen arguing with an overprotective boyfriend, Helen undergoing psychoanalysis. Influenced by the savage wit of poets like Mina Loy, Parmar's incisive skill is to highlight the latent absurdity of such encounters, and to revel in the irony that such disjunction delivers. In one particularly droll moment (poem xxxiv), Parmar consigns Helen to a daytime chat show: 'Today's topic: "So your husband sacrificed your only daughter that he might win the war for his brother's wife"'. What is most fascinating about the collection, is Parmar's self-aware position-taking in relation to this elusive term; as a British Sikh woman, the otherness of eidolon heightens her sense of displacement from Western cultural forms. As she articulates in the 'Afterword', she relishes this 'ignorance of Greek language', and through cross-cultural appropriation demands that being 'the wrong colour' will not deter her from bringing Helen into generative contact with the eidolons of modern America.

In Nancy Gaffield's recent offering, *Continental Drift*, we find not a sense of exile, but of division. Gaffield writes of 'Ruptures,/ transatlantic abrasions./ Crossings and starting over', as her poems disclose the tumultuous cleaving when we are split apart by having multiple homes. Sounding out the specificities of the landscape, the distance, spacing and widening gaps in the poems enact a sense of suspension – of being between two places. This liminality functions thematically, playing out in the conflicts of existing between two continents, and formally, through Gaffield's deft linguistic structures. Her first collection, *Tokaido Road* (2011), was a Poetry Book Society

Recommendation and in 2014 she worked with composer Nicola LeFanu to adapt the poems into an opera, featuring the Okeanos Ensemble and Caroline Clegg as director, which went on to tour nationally. There is sophisticated phonic elegance to Gaffield's third collection, *Continental Drift*, perhaps invigorated by her theatrical sojourn, that makes reading these poems, particularly aloud, a true pleasure. Gaffield's opening 'Proem' is as strong as any in the collection. It begins:

If only it were possible to arrive
at a condition of knowing
through language. What the rain
knows.

This introduction signals towards the key questions the collection poses: what is the relationship between language and landscape, and how do we mediate that relationship through poetry? In Gaffield we get the sense that her language is always at the threshold of knowing, such is its beauty and effortlessness. Poems are deeply searching and powerfully gesturing – her semantic unraveling is intensified to convey the responsibility, and fragility of the poet as the conduit between the word and the world. Gaffield acknowledges her debt to the US Language School (of whom Susan Howe has the most traction), yet her lyrical utterance is more reminiscent of poets like Barbara Guest and Peter Gizzi. Resoundingly though, Gaffield constructs her own unique poetic voice – coupling musicality with linguistic materiality and deep philosophical reflection, she affirms that it is the remit of the poet to bring to light the connections, continuities and contingencies *between* places.

Carved into four main parts, 'Po-Wa-Ha' (meaning water-wind-breath) in section 3 feels particularly fresh, as it re-frames Pueblo cosmology alongside a patch-work of political horrors ('The sun appeared again this morning/ I don't know how/ it dares/ to show its face'). The apposition of Gaffield's notes – including the site of atomic bomb testing and the Japanese invasion of China - constructs a powerful palimpsest of images that attests to her ethical grounding. What is most urgent in Gaffield's verse is her concern with negotiating the space of the contemporary. Sandeep Parmar also explores the idea of national boundaries. Most successfully in poem xiv. where Helen is positioned as a refugee: 'Helen falls between two limits/ is without documents', which is particularly pertinent to our current political moment. Bubbling at the surface of *Eidolon* is a penetrating critique that shows up the fallacy in our own culture. The banality of lines like, 'tabloids chewing gum energy drinks the 24 hour relief of *Better Homes/ and*

Gardens', mobilizes the quotidian and destroys the distance between antiquity and the present by outlining Helen's continued absence and inability to en-voice herself genuinely. The momentum of the poems lead us towards this crescendo of absence. This void – of communication, of connection found most prominently in the figure of Helen, a ghostly demarcation of absence personified – is Parmar's link to the past. Helen becomes a symbol for the voice-less women of history, as versions of femininity are constructed and deconstructed in the unfurling pages: 'we see the *real* Helen/ is the false we/ is the eidolon'. What we eventually recognise as the true eidolon then, the ungraspable phantom, is the possibility of capturing femininity itself.

Despite its academic rigor, *Continental Drift* is the more memorable read. It is easy to get lost in Gaffield's lyric unfoldings, but even as the poems become more experimental - unmoored and uncharted in their abstract beauty - she shelters the ear with her distinctive musicality. Gaffield achieves an astute sounding out of place – if the pebbles could speak, or the marshes, or the sea – this would certainly be their lexicon. Poems appear with fraying edges – endings and beginnings unravel before us, with a frame that is constantly dissolving, shifting, echoing-through. Gaffield's very here-ness, 'West, we were here', puts our being-in-space up for examination. The sea becomes the ultimate invocation of the liminal, so Gaffield's poems perform as homing-beacons, leading us towards the shores of meaning, guiding us home. Enacting a living in language that is assured and joyous, these poems resonate deeply and orient us in a new and forceful poetic landscape.