



# Sweatshop Women

VOLUME TWO

# PRAISE FOR SWEATSHOP WOMEN

*“The potency of the collection is in its ability to create understanding about worlds that are invisible.”*

— Magan Magan, *Mascara Literary Review*

*“[Sweatshop Women] makes it clear there are urgent stories that need to be told and reckoned with.”*

— Candice Chung, *The Sydney Morning Herald*

*“The pieces are colourful, clear-eyed snapshots of time, place and race.”*

— Thuy On, *The Saturday Paper*

*“Another quiet victory.”*

— Elizabeth Flux, *Kill Your Darlings*



Sweatshop  
Women



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VOLUME TWO

**Edited by Winnie Dunn with Foreword by Ruby Hamad**

An initiative of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement

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# FOREWORD

There was nothing like Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement when I was starting out as a writer and certainly nothing like it when I was growing up in Sydney's inner western suburbs in the final decades of the previous century. This was long before gentrification swept through these now coveted inner-city postcodes and we ruled these streets back then. 'We' being the often-wayward children of working-class immigrants and refugees that came from conflicts scattered across the globe, from Vietnam to Lebanon to what was then Yugoslavia. Bewildered and no doubt bewildering to many of those already here, we joined the established Chinese, Greek and Italian populations. We were not quite Wogs but something else, something more, but also something lesser.

Which is to say, we floundered in our youth. They asked us where we were from but perhaps they would have done a lot better to ask us who we were from, who we were, and indeed who we are now. But then again, how were we supposed to know? It was all too easy to internalise the most unflattering messages about our homelands, about our kin, and about ourselves, for there was not much for us to lean on back then to challenge them. Where was it that a young Levantine Arab

girl circa 1992 could look to see herself as something other than a victim to be saved or a problem to be eradicated, as a pet or as a threat? Our parents arrived here saddled with the invisible and visible scars of imperialism, conflict, persecution, poverty. And these we would inherit only to add some of our own; of marginalisation, humiliation, discrimination, fear and hatred. And perhaps the deepest scar of all – that of settler-colonialism. This is a scar we ourselves unwittingly inflict through our presence on this land, *which always was and always will be Aboriginal land.*

I came to ‘professional’ writing, by which I mean writing for public consumption, rather late. Already in my early thirties, I wondered if it wasn’t yet another boat I had missed. My secret was that I had wanted to be a writer since my age still matched my shoe size but my undoing was that, with such a dire lack of representation from which to draw inspiration, I had no idea what kind of writer I could or would be permitted to be. I eventually decided that it was no writer at all, and so I kept that dream on the shelf all through high school and finally discarded it in favour of a proper and sensible university degree.

Who could have guessed back then that it would be from Greater Western Sydney that so much of our exciting literature is now emanating – from those still neglected and derided postcodes? This is of course thanks in no small part to Sweatshop, which has attracted and fostered exceptional talent since its inception in 2013, and to its tireless manager and editor Winnie Dunn, who has put together this collection as

well as the first volume of *Sweatshop Women*. Women of colour and First Nations women now have a platform unimaginable just a few short years ago, and as the stories in this anthology demonstrate, they are not letting it go to any waste.

*Sweatshop Women* is a book for readers, for writers and for anyone who has craved a different kind of narrative. Amidst the howls of 'political correctness gone mad' and 'go back to where you came from', and despite the petty accusations that marginalised people have nothing of literary value to offer, these women just go ahead and do it. Like Volume One, this book is a testament to the importance of stories – of seeing what is possible, what is being done, and what has yet to be done. The women whose work features in this volume are first, second and third generation immigrants, they are Indigenous, they are religious, they are secular, they defy singular or easy categorisation.

These artists recreate the universal themes of everyday life with the twist of the particular. An attempted courtship is the setting for a young girl finding the courage to stand up to her strict mother. The sibling bond is explored through the eyes of an elder daughter, a ghost forever bound to her younger sister and who now stands between her and their ancestors. Dating, terrorism, the longing for what was left behind and the yearning for that which is yet to come; there is all this and more. But these women are not setting out to prove anything to us. They are not telling on their community nor are they its designated representatives. They are not here to spill the 'real truth' about being a woman of colour in this country at this time, since there can be no singular truth. They are

storytellers who have finally arrived and have no intention of leaving any time soon, which is as it should be.

Please join me and Sweatshop in celebrating the women whose work fill these pages, and in welcoming them to the literary community, which is where they have always belonged. Let their work be a testament to their determination as well as their talent.

**RUBY HAMAD**

# INTRODUCTION: AYE SPIRIT

How can women of colour love each other? Alice Walker teaches us in her definition of womanism that a womanist, 'Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.' What compels women of colour to write? bell hooks recognises writing as one of the many ways that we encounter the divine. In her article, 'When the Spirit Moves You', hooks argues, 'Most writers know that our visions often emerge from places that are mysterious – far removed from who we are and what we think we know. Faced with this reality again and again as we work with words, we can only acknowledge the presence of an unseen force.' What is a woman of colour? Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw educated us in intersectionality, the interconnected categories of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality that create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage, privilege and advantage. What are women of colour up against? Toni Morrison taught us about the White gaze, which renders the lives of people of colour as lives with no meaning and no depth independently of Whiteness. Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement has always been inspired by the contributions of the African-American women who have

shaped the global discussions around race and gender. As women of colour who are the students of these Black women, we declare our right to dismantle what Audre Lorde called, 'The Master's House'. So long as the major publishing houses in Australia remain the master's house, this book is the tool to dismantle it.

Sweatshop Women is an anthology series which showcases the work from a collective of women of colour. In the three years that I have led this group of writers, many have gone on to receive book deals, literary awards and literature grants, and they have been published in some of the most distinguished literary platforms in Australia. Amidst all these achievements, what has remained constant and ever-expanding is Sweatshop Women's dedication to ensuring that our sisters from Aboriginal, African, Arab, Asian and Pacific backgrounds are empowered to develop their own stories in imaginative and original ways.

In 2019, our collective met once a fortnight to read, write and participate in critical dialogue with each other outside of Australia's dominant White and patriarchal gaze. During our ongoing workshops, each participant built on her knowledge between 'good' and 'bad' writing, the importance of self-representation, and how literature can be used as a tool to create alternatives to the phenomenon known as 'imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. We also did what women of colour do best: commune with one another. The first half of 2019 brought horrific tragedies for people of colour in Australia and around the world. March saw the Christchurch terrorist attack, in which an Australian-born White supremacist

slaughtered fifty-one Muslims peacefully conducting their sacred Friday prayers within two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. April saw the Sri Lanka Easter Sunday bombings conducted by Muslim extremists, in which two-hundred-and-fifty-nine people were killed in churches while attending Mass as well as in luxury hotels. In the aftermath of these tragedies, our women's collective, which proudly includes many sisters from Muslim, Tamil and Sri Lankan backgrounds, became a safe and unifying space to discuss issues and develop and share writing surrounding the events, under the leadership of Maryam Azam following the Christchurch terrorist attack, and Christine Shamista and Brahmi Kumarasamy following the Sri Lanka Easter Sunday bombings. It was during these workshops that I came to wholly understand the purpose of a critically conscious writers' collective and publication exclusively for women of colour: in a world where patriarchy, Whiteness and extremism continue to dominate media, arts and politics, critical intercultural dialogue between women of colour is the foundation of healing action.

The first volume of *Sweatshop Women* was a reclamation of our stories. One year on, this second volume is a communion with our stories. Phoebe Grainer writes through her ancestors of time immemorial. Christine Afoa speaks with alofa from the lands and waters of Samoa. Christine Shamista mourns through poetry, Cindy El Sayed shows us how we may falter under the many eyes of God, and Shankari Chandran and Gayatri Nair reveal the many ways we can connect with the divine. Jessica Wendy Mensah kneads her Ghanaian ancestry through banku, Abeny Mayol uses irony to dismantle

rigid Western sentiments about race and marriage, and Meyrnah Khodr shows us how food and family collide in the Arab-Australian Muslim households of Bankstown. Janette Chen unpacks the early trials of Chinese-Australian sisterhood while Lieu-Chi Nguyen gives voice to Vietnamese-Australian sisters long gone but always remembered. Sydnye Allen stands against the systems of oppression that attempt to erase the name of her African-American-Azeri-Australian child, Ferdous Bahar continues to articulate the barriers faced by Australian Muslim women in the corporate workplace, and Divya Venkataraman outlines the double standards Indian women face when making informed choices about their own bodies. Sara Saleh and Aseel Harb talk back to intergenerational guilt and trauma as Arab-Australian Muslim women, Sheree Joseph explores the inimitable voice of the 'tayta', Mary Anne Taouk moves between Arabic and English within the regional boundaries of NSW, Flordeliz Bonifacio 'marks her territory' after migrating from the Philippines, and Diane Wanasawek reevaluates karma. Maryam Azam fends off the evil eye in Blacktown and Shirley Le challenges the 'evil empire' on a busy Sydney train.

To accompany this incredible line-up of writers, both new and familiar, *Sweatshop Women: Volume Two* is honoured to showcase an original series of paintings by award-winning Lebanese-Australian Muslim artist, Amani Haydar. As one of Australia's leading Muslim artists, Amani has produced the breathtaking artwork for our cover and the individual portraits of all twenty-two writers featured within these pages. Following the tragic loss of her mother to domestic violence in 2015,

Amani's art has given women of colour throughout Australia hope, inspiration and courage. Her work creates a visual and visceral language through bold colours and eloquent patterns, which speaks to the pain and sadness that women of colour must confront, and the strength that we find within our communities, within our cultures and within our bodies.

Sweatshop Women communes with the Spirit and it is within this second volume that the Spirit of ourselves as women of colour are fully embraced. We love the struggle, we love our Folk, we love ourselves. Regardless.

Aye Spirit, here we are: let us always be moved in you.

**WINNIE DUNN**

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# GNUM GNUM

PHOEBE GRAINER

Young woman. Gnum gnum? Old woman. It was here. Young woman. Gnum gnum? Old woman. I tied him up in this tree, your grandfather, up top in one of them branches. Before them mob in the black car came, one of them young fellas, Murri one, ran up, he was working on this station, see. Well I think he was. He come running, dirty old dusty cowboy hat and jeans, and I had this little small tin yumba next to these big old trees, and he came running and gave me the biggest fright. I was hiding in the corner holding your grandfather, he was so small, only few weeks old. And that Murri fulla, he banged on the yumba until I came out. I was frightened. But he was banging and yelling out. Migaloo, qudda qudda, migaloo! And I ran out, baby in my hand and he pointed down to where there was dust rising in the air, motor car. He didn't know me, we didn't talk, anything like that. I'm not sure if I ever saw him, we would have got in trouble anyway if we did talk. I looked where he pointed, and I could see smoke, dust from motor car. I felt sick, like my stomach had fallen out on the dirt at my feet. I turned to him and he had grabbed a bag, I can't remember where from, but it was hessian one, maybe from potatoes or something, he had it in his hand, his

eyes indicating for me to put baby in there. I didn't want to let your grandfather go but I had no plan where to hide him and I was running out of time. I put your grandfather in that brown hessian bag and he gave it to me with some rope and looked up at that – this tree. I climbed it, that Murri fulla pushed me up, fast I climbed, got up high, lucky it was big you know, lot of leaf. Hide em. And I tied him there, your grandfather, the little thing he was. He was so quiet, he knew something was going on and he just laid there still and calm watching, I could hear his little breath. I kissed him on his fat little forehead and then tied that hessian bag up and onto the branch. I left him up there and then I climbed down. I ran back into the yumba and I got all them baby clothes and that and I threw them on the fire. I sat looking out on the land, this tree behind me with your grandfather. I tried looking for that Murri fulla, but he was gone. I never saw him after that, at the station, or anywhere, that Murri one. I don't know where he went. When that black motor car came, white fellas, them migaloos, they jumped out. They came out and walked straight in my house. No words were spoken, they knew I knew what they came for. I sat there drinking tea. I didn't look at them. I just saw their shiny black shoe, devil foot. I heard them moving around things inside my yumba, tipping my stuff upside down, searching, but I didn't care, I sat there calm. They wasn't going to take my child from me, I knew that. They walked outside, right up next to me, stood there for a moment, then they left. No words spoken. My baby he didn't cry. He didn't make a sound your grandfather. Young woman. You didn't once think they would take him. Old woman. No. Young woman. Why didn't you see that man, the Murri one? Old woman. Spirit. I think that's what he was.



[WWW.SWEATSHOP.WS](http://WWW.SWEATSHOP.WS)

Sweatshop Women is an exciting and contemporary collection of prose and poetry written by women from Indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds. In this second volume, Australia's most urgent new voices return to reclaim their stories of culture, sovereignty and diaspora.

Featuring: Christine Afoa, Sydnye Allen, Maryam Azam, Ferdous Bahar, Flordeliz Bonifacio, Shankari Chandran, Janette Chen, Cindy El Sayed, Phoebe Grainer, Aseel Harb, Amani Haydar, Sheree Joseph, Meymah Khodr, Shirley Le, Abeny Mayol, Jessica Wendy Mensah, Gayatri Nair, Lieu-Chi Nguyen, Sara Saleh, Christine Shamista, Mary Anne Taouk, Divya Venkataraman and Diane Wanasawek. Foreword by Ruby Hamad.

EDITED BY WINNIE DUNN