

Writing Against Erasure: Language Failure, Counter-Memory, and the Insurgent Voice in Jazz Money's Poetic Practice

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The act of writing poetry has long served as a powerful medium of resistance, offering marginalized voices a space to articulate identity, memory, and dissent. From the Hungryalists of Bengal post independence to the Beatniks in the United States of America, poetry has not merely been a medium of pleasure and a medium of self-expression, but a format that has been used to cry the cries of dissent, often bringing forth a wave of change, a call for revolution and resistance, if not so radical at the very least it has often been successful in holding the grounds of resistance. In the contemporary context, Jazz Money's poetry emerges as a vital site of such resistance, where personal, political, and collective struggles converge. As a Wiradjuri poet, artist, and activist, Money confronts the enduring legacies of colonial violence, systemic erasure of Indigenous languages, and the marginalization of queer and feminist subjectivities. Her debut poetry collection, *how to make a basket* (2021), alongside individual poems such as *if I write a poem*, reflects an urgent confrontation with biopolitical control, structural capitalism, and intergenerational trauma. Money's poetry is not simply an aesthetic exercise but a radical, ethical practice of survival and resistance. Money writes not only for herself but for generations whose languages and stories have been systematically stolen. In doing so, her poetry becomes a mode of reclaiming agency, bearing witness, and envisioning future possibility amid ongoing structural violence.

In the opening lines of the poem *if I write a poem*, Jazz Money writes: "*if I write a poem / it's for the pen / banned from my grandmother's hand*" (Money 1).

This evocative imagery immediately signals a profound experience of hegemonic and authoritarian control, wherein the very act of expression has been forcibly silenced. The reference to the 'grandmother's hand' introduces a significant generational dimension, suggesting that the structures of oppression are not confined to a singular moment in time but are deeply embedded within a trans-generational legacy. The grandmother figure, traditionally associated with wisdom, experience, and cultural transmission, becomes emblematic of a lineage that has suffered systemic disenfranchisement. Her inability to hold the pen symbolizes the enforced cultural amnesia imposed by colonial and patriarchal powers, effectively cutting off access to both language and historical narrative. The subsequent stanza intensifies this theme by illustrating the theft of language from the mouths of babies in cribs: "*and if I write / it's for our language / stolen from the mouths / of babies in cribs*" (Money 1). Here, the act of linguistic dispossession is portrayed as extending to the most vulnerable members of society, emphasizing the pervasive and all-encompassing nature of colonial violence. The juxtaposition of the aged grandmother and the infant highlights the indiscriminate reach of this oppression, demonstrating that it spares no individual, regardless of age or status. More than a depiction of individual suffering, this poetic imagery reflects a systemic and institutionalized project of erasure, one that aims to sever generational continuity and cultural memory. By drawing attention to both the oldest and the youngest in society, Money's poem lays bare the seemingly infinite and self-perpetuating nature of this oppressive structure. It suggests that the mechanisms of control—whether through the denial of education, the prohibition of language, or the erasure of identity—are not momentary acts but rather deeply entrenched strategies of colonial power designed to persist across generations without rupture. The absence of any clear sign of resistance within these stanzas further emphasizes the oppressive system's resilience, making the poet's own act of writing an urgent and radical intervention in a context of enduring structural violence.

In the fourth stanza of *if I write a poem*, Jazz Money writes: "*and if I write / it's because our story / hasn't been written / by us / for*

us" (Money 1). This statement captures a crucial political and epistemological stance regarding representation, authorship, and historical narrative. The act of writing here transcends mere self-expression and becomes a deliberate, radical assertion of agency against historical erasure. The poem foregrounds the tension between being written and writing oneself, highlighting that the dominant narratives of history and identity have systematically excluded First Nations voices. This is a direct challenge to colonial historiography, which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques in her seminal essay, "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" where she argues that subaltern subjects are not simply excluded from dominant discourse but are rendered voiceless within it, their stories told by others rather than by themselves (Spivak 271).

Money's insistence that their story has "not been written by us, for us" reflects a need to reclaim the power of narrative production. It reveals the structural violence inherent in colonial practices of historiography that silence or appropriate Indigenous histories, thereby perpetuating epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker defines epistemic injustice as the wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower, which directly applies here: First Nations peoples have been denied the authority to narrate their own histories, identities, and experiences (Fricker 1). Moreover, this stanza encapsulates the Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge, wherein the power to produce knowledge—and thus history and truth—is monopolized by dominant structures (Foucault 27). The poet's decision to write is an intervention in this system, a method of counter-conduct that seeks to disrupt and challenge the epistemic frameworks that have excluded and controlled marginalized identities. Writing becomes not merely a personal act but a political one, oriented toward resisting colonial authority and producing alternative histories that center Indigenous subjectivities. Thus, the act of writing in Money's poem is not simply about the ability or inability to write, but fundamentally about the right to write and the ethical responsibility of representation. It is a reclamation of voice and narrative agency—a deliberate act of resistance against historical and ongoing erasure.

In the lines *"and if I don't write / it's because I can't bring my baby / into a world on fire"* (Money 1), Jazz Money engages with the politics of silence as a deliberate and strategic position within the larger context of resistance. The declaration of not writing does not signify absence of thought or passivity; rather, it reveals the oppressive conditions under which speech and representation are constrained. The inability to write stems from a recognition of the systemic violence that continues to render language itself insufficient, complicit, or dangerous within structures of power. Judith Butler's concept of precariousness highlights this tension, arguing that marginalized lives exist in a condition where social, political, and material vulnerability is persistent, and where the ability to speak or represent oneself is always under threat (Butler 22).

Money's choice to emphasize the impossibility of writing in this moment signals an awareness that articulating resistance or identity is not always a matter of volition but is shaped by the conditions of the present. Her silence becomes a form of political expression in itself, exposing the limits of discourse in a world marked by ongoing environmental destruction, racialized violence, and systemic exclusion. In this context, silence is not merely a passive absence but is entangled with the same forces that perpetuate erasure and structural violence. Spivak's argument in *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* is pertinent here: the subaltern is not only excluded from speaking in hegemonic frameworks but is structurally prohibited from speaking at all, and any attempt to speak is mediated through dominant systems that distort or appropriate their voice (Spivak 287). Moreover, this refusal to write reflects an ethical stance against replicating the cycles of oppression. Writing in a world already "on fire" risks exposing future generations to further harm, as the act of articulation itself could become another site of violence or appropriation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes the dangers of speaking for the subaltern, cautioning that such acts often reinforce the very systems of domination they attempt to contest (Spivak 305). In this light, Money's silence is not resignation but a conscious disruption of the trans-generational continuum of oppression. Her statement reveals the impossibility of breaking the cycle of

systemic violence simply through articulation alone; instead, it gestures toward the need for a different kind of praxis – one that holds space for unarticulated grief, deferred narratives, and embodied resistance.

In the lines “*and if I don’t write / it’s because this language / these letters / are not worthy*” (Money 1), Jazz Money addresses the profound failure of language to represent the fullness of experience under systemic oppression. The poet’s reluctance to write emerges from a deep skepticism toward the colonial language apparatus that has historically functioned as a tool of control, erasure, and subjugation. The assertion that the language itself is “not worthy” signals a rupture in trust, where inherited linguistic structures no longer serve as viable vessels for truth or identity. Walter Benjamin, in *The Task of the Translator*, argues that language bears the burden of mediating meaning across worlds, yet colonial languages often function to overwrite indigenous epistemologies rather than preserve them (Benjamin 74). This failure is not accidental but a direct consequence of the epistemic violence embedded within colonial power relations.

However, the poem does not remain in a space of muteness. Money continues: “*and if I write a word / on the inside of my mouth / in the dust / in the sand*” (Money 1). These metaphors of “dust” and “sand” evoke the land itself, which holds profound significance in First Nations epistemologies as both a site of belonging and resistance. The act of inscribing words into the earth becomes an act of defiance against the imposed erasures of history. This embodied inscription parallels the notion of counter-memory discussed by Michel Foucault, where the marginalized assert alternative narratives precisely because dominant histories seek to silence them (Foucault 81). The poet’s voice, once constrained by oppressive structures, now seeks to embed itself into the most elemental of materials – the land – suggesting that true expression must emerge from and return to the ground, as a reclaiming of place and origin. Moreover, the “inside of my mouth” signals an internalized tension between silence and expression. The word is formed but not yet spoken, caught in the liminal space of potential articulation. Judith Butler’s concept of performativity

becomes relevant here: speech is not merely a transparent act of communication but a performance that enacts identity and resistance (Butler 519). The word, inscribed in dust and sand, becomes a performative act of dissent against the totalizing forces that have sought to render the poet voiceless. The very earth, long subjected to colonial expropriation and violence, becomes a medium through which the voice finds its way, challenging the imposed silence.

Ultimately, the final declaration – “*because I know / no other truth at all*” (Money 1) – marks an outburst of an irrepressible voice that refuses erasure. It is not the authoritative or sanctioned truth, but an insurgent truth grounded in lived experience and survival. The poet’s voice does not merely respond to oppression; it seeks to destabilize the oppressive order itself. The image of words inscribed in dust and sand suggests the potential for these traces of dissent to outlast imposed structures, shaking the foundations of the hegemonic order in much the same way that natural forces erode and transform the landscape. The land becomes both witness and participant in the poet’s resistance, highlighting the interdependence of identity, language, and place in the struggle against structural violence.

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